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Finding Voice: An Exploration of College Students with Learning Differences within the Context of Family

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FINDING VOICE: AN EXPLORATION OF
COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

LYNN ABRAHAMS

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY

July 23, 2012

ABSTRACT

The transition to college affects not only students but also the entire family system. Parents sometimes become quite involved with a student's college education, a phenomenon that is beginning to get significant attention in the student development and higher education literature (Wartman & Savage, 2008). When students who have documented learning disabilities enroll in college, the concerns of family members can be even greater (Brinkerhoff, 2002). The purpose of this study was to investigate identity development in college students who have language-based learning disabilities. This study utilized the method of multiple case study design (six cases). Each case involved a student attending the Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL) at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts, and a family member of the student's choice. Eighteen interviews were conducted—two with each student and one with each family member. The study also included four home visits with family members. Voice-centered method (Gilligan, 2003) of analysis was used and “I-Poems,” constructed from each student interview, were shared with students in the final interview. Results from this study support modifications to both Tanner's (2006, 2010) and Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2004, 2007, 2010) models of identity development. Findings from this study have implications both for services offered to students with learning differences and for the approach colleges take in responding to their family members.

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I could not have accomplished this dissertation without the support, encouragement, and love of my family, friends, and colleagues. I first want to thank my mother, Rosalie Abrahams, for instilling in me the deep love of learning that has led to the pursuit of this doctoral degree. I thank my father, Kenneth Abrahams, for helping me appreciate the importance of laughter in my life and in my work. I thank my husband, Rob Bertsche, for being my best friend—and a talented APA editor to boot! I thank my two sons, Josh and Jeremy Bertsche, for their help with everything computer-related, for their constant encouragement—and for the courage they have shown as they themselves navigate the passage of emerging adulthood. In addition, I am blessed with wonderful friends who believe in me and who understand what completing this degree means to me. Thank you, Susan, Maureen, Liz, Jody, Stephanie, and Jill!

I am not sure if I can express how deeply grateful I am to my doctoral committee: Dr. Amy Rutstein Riley, Dr. Judith Cohen, and Dr. Diane Goss. You listened to me when I needed to talk through ideas, you read my updates and gave insightful and helpful feedback, and you reminded me that what I was doing was important—when I sometimes lost sight of where I was going. You encouraged me to listen to my own voice as I made multiple decisions designing methodology, analyzing data, and forming conclusions. I would not have reached this goal without your support, encouragement, and belief in me, and in the importance of this research project.

Much of this dissertation grows out of the experience I have gained over the past 15 years as a faculty member in Curry College's Program for the Advancement of Learning. I have been privileged to work alongside an extraordinarily talented and supportive group of colleagues, and to get to know hundreds upon hundreds of students, each with their own distinctive learning

styles, as they grappled with the challenges of college. I am also grateful to Curry College for the sabbatical that enabled me to do much of the research for this dissertation in a focused setting.

Finally, I wish to thank the six families who allowed me into their lives, homes, and hearts. These students and parents took time out of busy days to talk openly with a researcher whom, in many cases, they did not know at all. I thank each participant for trusting me by inviting me in to share your memories, thoughts, joys, fears, sadnesses, and hopes. I have been touched and inspired by each of your stories.

Lynn Abrahams
July, 2012

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

The transition to college affects not only students but also their entire family system. Parents sometimes become quite involved with a student's college education, a phenomenon that is beginning to get significant attention in the student development and higher education literature (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Compared to even a decade or two ago, parents today are far more involved with—and far less willing to let go of—their college-age sons and daughters. College students today, for their part, tend to rely more on parents than did prior generations (Wartman & Savage, 2008). When students have documented learning differences and are enrolled in college, the concerns of family members can be even greater (Brinkerhoff, 2002). Questions are being asked on many college campuses about how to deal appropriately with the parents of students with learning disabilities.

I have been intensely involved with these questions throughout the course of my career as an educator. For more than 20 years, I have worked with college students who have learning differences that include dyslexia, non-verbal learning disabilities, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. For the most recent 15 of those years, I have been a faculty member in the Program for the Advancement of Learning (“PAL”) at Curry College, a four-year liberal arts institution in Milton, Massachusetts. PAL offers an academic support program for bright college students with language-based learning disabilities. The goal of my work is to support students' self-awareness and meta-cognitive skills as they tackle the academic and social demands of the college setting.

Over the years, I have observed a dramatic increase in the degree to which family members are involved in their college students' lives, even on a day-to-day basis. I am curious about how such a high level of family involvement may affect the pace and manner in which students develop a sense of independent identity. At the same time, I am also aware that college students, and in particular college students with learning differences, often feel alone and overwhelmed as they tackle the new challenges of college life and draw on family members for support.

Research Questions

These observations have led me to the questions that inform this qualitative study. The purpose of this study is to investigate identity development in college students who have language-based learning disabilities. Particular attention is given to the context of family and how a student's family relationships may affect the development of "voice" (Aquilino, 2006; Gilligan, 2003; Belenky et al, 1986).

How is the developmental growth of a learning-disabled student affected by the degree to which family members are involved in their education? Can the concern and participation of family members somehow be harnessed and directed, so that the energy of family members supports students' development of separate identity? Or, to put the question more broadly: How do college students with learning disabilities develop internal voice within the context of family? It is my hope that this research will contribute to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the development of emerging adults who are coming to college with learning differences, with implications for both the services offered to students and the approach colleges take in responding to parental involvement.

Personal and Professional Roots

My deep connection to this topic is rooted in both personal and professional contexts. My background growing up in a modern orthodox Jewish community in Springfield, Massachusetts, helps me to appreciate the powerful role cultural background plays in the process of claiming one's own values, beliefs, and goals. Finding my own voice, both in the Jewish world, where the male voice dominated, and in the environment outside of that world, where I felt like I did not quite fit, has been challenging. I believe, in fact, that I was drawn to my profession of working with college students who have learning differences because I can relate to the sharp feelings of being different. I am acutely aware of how difficult it can be to find, claim, and develop confidence in one's own voice.

Being a mother of two sons in college has also informed how I view the process of parenting emerging adults. For most of my career my children were younger than my students. When my children became my students' ages, I began to develop a more compassionate appreciation of how the parents of my students felt. I began to see that the world of higher education could be complicated and confusing for parents as well as students. I became aware of the different needs that different students have as they transition to and become accustomed to the college environment. As a parent, I became aware that the less anxious I felt, the better I could support my sons' independent problem-solving skills. As a direct result of these experiences, I joined with a colleague, Curry's Director of Advising, to develop the Curry College Family Programs, which occur each year on Accepted Students Day, during Summer Orientation, and on Family Weekend.

My work developing programs for parents, combined with over 20 years of working professionally with college students who are facing their learning challenges in the college

environment, informs my interests in this topic. The work I do—a combination of teaching, counseling, mentoring, and coaching—provides me an opportunity that many classroom teachers do not get. I am able to engage students in one-to-one conversations that go beyond academics. Through these learning conversations, I have come to appreciate the difficulties students have finding, acknowledging, and relying on their own particular set of strengths and talents. It is these moments of questioning and growing (with a particular focus on the contexts of each individual's family and the environment of higher education) that I explore in this research.

Theoretical Framework

Before reviewing the literature that sheds light on the field of identity development in college students with learning disabilities, I first need to outline the theoretical frameworks that form the bedrock of my particular approach to this topic. I began this project by studying the field of Adult Learning and Development. I started reading Knowles, Dewey, and Lindeman, and ultimately landed on the important work of Jack Mezirow. I saw a direct connection between Mezirow's model of transformative learning and the changes I witnessed in my students over their years in college. This led to a more focused look at the field of Developmental Psychology and its many applications—cognitively, socially, and psychologically—to college students with learning disabilities. The framework of developmental stages triggers questions about the context in which this development takes place. In fact, it is the connections between individuals and their particular context that became the focus of this study. The final layer of theory that sets the bedrock involves feminist perspectives and critical theory. The marginalized nature of college students with learning disabilities may have connections to the development of what I call *voice*. The notion of *voice* has become a central concept in feminist theory (Belenky et al, 1986;

Gilligan, 2003), and is useful when applying to the population of college students with learning challenges.

Adult Learning

Malcolm Knowles (1973) was one of the first educators to differentiate between teaching children and adults. In separating the concept of *andragogy*, the art and science of helping adults learn, from *pedagogy*, the art and science of helping children learn, Knowles contributed to the establishment of adult learning as a respected and separate field of study. Years later, Brookfield (1984) stated that the importance of this new label had given adult educators a “new badge of identity” (p. 90). Knowles based his model on four key assumptions that he defined as particular characteristics of the adult learner:

1. Adults become more self-directed as they get older.
2. Adults accumulate a rich reservoir of experience that is a resource for learning.
3. Readiness for learning is related to developmental tasks of adulthood.
4. Adults are more problem-centered than subject-centered (Knowles, 1980, pp. 44-45).

These assumptions ring true for young adults as well as older adults. It is noteworthy that some students who have a history of struggling with academic issues have had to develop a maturity that places them in the adult category before many of their peers (Pizzolato, 2003). Although Knowles’s work is important, a noticeable and important gap in his model is the lack of acknowledgement of the sociocultural context in which students are raised. This critique of Knowles has also been observed from a sociological perspective (Jarvis, 1987) and, later, from critical perspectives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

A recurring focus in adult learning literature is the tension between individual/psychological and group/sociological perspectives. The context in which adult education was

framed in America was one of individualism, independence, and Protestant-capitalistic work ethic (Merriam et al., 2007). Knowles's work has its roots in the work of both John Dewey (1916, 1938) and Eduard Lindeman (1926), who emphasize a progressive approach to learning. The Progressive Movement, in contrast with the more traditional classical education of the time, was rooted in profound changes of the American experience in the last decades of the nineteenth century and earlier part of the twentieth, which include industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. In the classic text *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) states that education is a social process rooted in experience. Although Knowles does not highlight the social context of learning, he has clearly been influenced by Dewey's thoughts about the crucial role of experience in learning.

Lindeman and Dewey, who were friends and colleagues, shared the belief that education was rooted in social justice. Both had a keen awareness of social context. In 1926, Eduard Lindeman (1885-1953), a professor of social philosophy at Columbia University School of Social Work, proposed that the role of adult education was to improve society as well as support the individual learner. Knowles (1980) echoes Dewey's core belief in using experience in education when he acknowledges that adults are more problem-centered than subject-centered (pp. 44-45). Lindeman (1926) writes, "In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student's needs and interests" (p. 6). There is a need to re-view Lindeman's words as they apply to students who learn differently, as well as to adult learners.

Each of Knowles's assumptions has spawned whole bodies of research in the adult learning and development literature in areas such as self-directed learning (Tough, 1978; Tennant & Pogson, 1995), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 1987), transformative

learning (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2005; Daloz, 1999; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), and the role of development on learning (Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1976; Fowler, 1981; Perry, 1999; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). While all of these areas of study merit attention, my work is most influenced by Transformative Learning and the role of development in learning.

Knowles's assumptions of how adults learn are echoed in Jack Mezirow's (2000, 2009) model of transformative learning. Mezirow (2000) assumes that meaning exists primarily within us rather than in external forms. As adults learn, they generally either integrate new experiences with previous knowledge or reject new information. By contrast, a true change in our frames of reference becomes what Mezirow calls a transformation. This will not occur without critical reflection and the questioning of assumptions. A key component of transformative learning is that the first step in the process usually is the result of a disorienting dilemma (an example could be the shift from secondary educational settings to higher education). Only if there is an experience or an environment that creates enough dissonance, will an individual choose to change (Mezirow, 2000).

The process of transformative learning can be slow because this type of change is not superficial. Daloz (1999) observes, "Transformations rarely, if ever, come about abruptly. Rather, they slip into place piece by piece until they become suddenly visible, often to others first and only later to ourselves" (p. 59). Coming to college has been a disorientating experience that has jarred many students' world and may possibly trigger an assessment of previous assumptions. Although a core element of transformative learning is critical reflection, it is important to note that researchers such as Dirkx, Tisdell, and Taylor (Mezirow, Taylor & Associates, 2009) are investigating the role of affective ways of knowing that "prioritize experience and identify for the learner what is personally significant in the process of reflection"

(p. 4). It is this type of reflection that will be necessary for transformative changes to occur in the college students with learning disabilities with whom I work.

Mezirow contends that there are characteristics that must be present in order for transformative changes to take place. He writes, “Preconditions for realizing these values [of transformative learning] and finding one’s voice for free full participation in discourse include elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security and emotional intelligence” (p. 73). Belenky (2000) points out a problem in Mezirow’s presumption of equality among participants in the reflective discourse that is a necessary component of transformation. This presumption could exclude marginalized populations, including women, minorities, students with learning disabilities, and students returning to school late in life. A second problem Belenky points out, in her chapter entitled “Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing,” is an over-emphasis on the end result of transformation—which detracts from the nuances of the process involved with transformative learning. The focus of this current study is on just those nuances.

Although transformative learning is one of the most important models of adult learning, it is also curious that it is assumed, as it was with Lindeman and Knowles, that what we call *adulthood* comes immediately after *adolescence*—and that one can pinpoint exactly when that happens. A serious gap in the adult learning literature is that many theorists do not address the transition between adolescence and adulthood, nor do they examine how to discern the specific years when this happens.

Developmental Psychology

When discussing intellectual development, the starting point is Jean Piaget. Steeped in both biology and philosophy, Piaget describes four stages of thinking: sensorimotor intelligence

(ages 0-2), preoperational (ages 2-5), concrete operational thought (ages 6-10), and formal operational thought (ages 11-15). Robert Kegan describes an important aspect of Piaget's work that can be seen mirrored in Mezirow's model of Transformative Learning:

Central to Piaget's framework – and often ignored even by those who count themselves as Piagetian – is this activity, equilibration. Whether in the study of the mollusk or the human child, Piaget's principal loyalty was to the ongoing conversation between the individuating organism and the world, a process of adaption shaped by the tension between the assimilation of new experience to the old “grammar” and the accommodation of the old grammar to new experience. (Kegan, 1982, pp. 43-44)

Emphasizing the process, both internally and externally driven, of the developmental path of cognition, Kegan highlights the tension that continues as adolescents grow into emerging adults.

Although Piaget's stages appear to stop at adolescence, the developmental process continues. Many researchers have built on the core work of Piaget to focus on development in the adult years. The works of Kohlberg (1984), Basseches (1985), Perry (1970), and Fowler (1981) have helped to outline how emerging adults develop, particularly with respect to cognitive development.

Social Context

As becomes clear when looking at the work of developmental stage theorists, individuals do not develop in a vacuum; they are connected to layers of an environmental web. Piaget acknowledged the interplay between individual and social growth. Kari Taylor (2008) writes, “in order to understand . . . today's diverse college student population, scholars need to synthesize two areas that have traditionally been separated: the psychological perspective, which focuses on

how the individual makes meaning, and the sociological perspective, which focuses on how groups make meaning” (p. 215).

An important sociological model that informs the way I look at college students with learning disabilities is Bronfenbrenner’s model of the ecology of development. This model views each person as located at the center of a series of concentric circles that extend into the surrounding environment (Taylor, p. 218); those circles contain the environmental variables that Bronfenbrenner outlines. Within the first circle are Microsystems, in which the individual is involved with face-to-face interactions with friends, family, and classmates. The second contains Mesosystems, where two or more Microsystems interact (such as living-learning communities or service learning sites). Next are Exosystems, settings that are external to the individual and yet affect her, such as university policies and curricula. Finally, Macrosystems consist of cultural beliefs, norms, or historical events that impact the individual’s community.

It is important to note the similarities between Bronfenbrenner, Mezirow, and Piaget. All three of these theorists from different fields of study acknowledge “the nuances of the mutual shaping process that occurs as individuals negotiate their environments” (Taylor, p. 232).

Feminist Perspectives

Adult learning theory has roots in psychological development—but it also has roots in social action and critical theory (Horton & Freire, 1990; hooks, 1994; Tisdell, 2001a, 2001b). Thinking critically about established theories or practices can push us forward. When Carol Gilligan (1979) pointed out that women had been missing as research subjects in developmental stage theorists’ work (Belenky et al., 1986), she encouraged researchers to ask about other marginalized groups as well.

In the seminal work *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (Belenky et al., 1986), the metaphor of *voice* emerged from the data as a pivotal construct. Women tended to describe their lives in terms of *voice* and *silence*: “speaking up,” “speaking out,” “not being heard,” “saying what you mean,” or “having no words” (p. 18). Scientists and philosophers tend to use visual metaphors, such as equating truth with light, in contrast with the emphasis on *voice* by women who may feel marginalized. This is a useful construct to apply to the population of this current research, college students with language-based learning issues. This is a population which has been identified as lacking by the educational system and has been set apart.

Definitions of Key Terms

Learning disabilities/Learning differences (LD):

A learning disability is a neurologically based deficit in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, or mathematics problem-solving. A learning disability is not a result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, limited cognitive abilities, psychiatric problems, economic disadvantage, or limited proficiency in the English language (see 20 U.S.C. 1401(30)).

Language-based learning disabilities:

Language-based learning disability refers to a spectrum of difficulties related to the understanding and use of both spoken and written language. The number and severity of difficulties individuals experience vary widely. For instance, one student may have difficulty decoding words when reading or spelling, but no difficulty with oral expression or listening comprehension. Another student may experience difficulty with all three. Language skills are

categorized into three interrelated areas: receptive language, oral and written expressive language, and decoding/encoding (Landmark School).

Nonverbal learning disabilities:

A nonverbal learning disability is a neurological condition believed to result from damage to the white matter connections in the right hemisphere of the brain. These students often have strong verbal abilities and a strong memory. The area of difficulties involves non-verbal realms of information. The three major categories often presented are:

1. *Motoric*: lack of coordination, severe balance problems, and difficulties with graphomotor skills. The student may have handwriting that is very difficult to read and may rely on the computer for writing.
2. *Visual-spatial-organizational*: poor visual recall and difficulties with spatial relations. Students may struggle with reading graphs and charts, writing out math computations, or doing hands-on art projects.
3. *Social*: lack of ability to comprehend nonverbal communication, difficulties adjusting to transitions and novel situations, and deficits in social judgment and social interaction. Although the student with social disabilities may have excellent verbal abilities, he or she may misread facial cues or misunderstand a person's tone of voice.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD):

This is a neurologically based condition characterized by distractibility, short attention span, and impulsiveness. Some students with AD/HD experience hyperactivity and have a hard time sitting through long lectures. A student who has AD/HD without hyperactivity, called "inattentive type," experiences an inability to focus that feels like hearing a number of radio stations at the same time.

Psycho-educational Assessments:

A comprehensive psycho-educational assessment usually involves a full Wechsler Adult (or Child) Intelligence Scale (WAIS-IV) or the Woodcock Johnson Cognitive Battery; Achievement tests in reading, math, and writing; a variety of memory, motor, or fluency tests; and auditory, visual, or language processing tests.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):

This 1975 federal law requires school systems to ensure that each student, regardless of disability, is entitled to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. This law does not apply to post-secondary education.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504):

The primary intention of this federal civil rights law is to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. The law applies to both children and adults with disabilities. It states: “No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States shall, solely by reason of his or her handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” (29 U.S.C. 794)

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), amended in 2009:

This civil rights law extends the provisions of Section 504 to the private sector, such as private businesses and non-government funded institutions and services.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):

This federal law requires colleges and universities to protect the confidentiality of students’ academic records. The law states that the institution cannot release information regarding a student without the student’s written authorization. The existence of FERPA has an

impact on the relationship between parents and the institution. Once students attend post-secondary school, they are treated as adults responsible for their own academic records.

The Medical Model and the Social Model:

The traditional view, when defining people with disabilities, is that the disabilities are defects or deficiencies that set some individuals apart from others. This view is often called the “medical model”; the goals of this model are to fix what is broken (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). More recently, a “social model” of disability has emerged that describes disabled individuals as ones who live in a social environment that fails to meet their needs. In this view, the mismatch between the individual and the environment may in fact be responsible for the label of disability (Wolanin & Steele, 2004; Waber, 2010).

Overview of Each Chapter in the Dissertation

This chapter outlined the context of the problem of identity development in college students who have language-based learning disabilities within the context of family. It set out the primary research question, described my personal and professional roots, explained the theoretical framework, and offered definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 will focus on four bodies of literature that frame the primary research topic: emerging adulthood, identity development with college students, the changing environment of higher education, and college students with learning differences. Chapter 3 continues the discussion with a focus on research methodology. The rationale for the use of case study design, a description of the sample population, the three phases of data collection, and the procedures used in data analysis and interpretation are all discussed in depth.

In Chapter 4, the focus will shift to the data of the study. Each of the six student cases is described as if painting a portrait by sharing general impressions of each main character. A basic

outline of the chronology, extending from the first memories of a diagnosis of learning disabilities through the first two years of college, is described. Chapter 5 sets out the study's five primary findings, and Chapter 6 discusses possible interpretations of those findings. Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with recommendations and a final reflection.

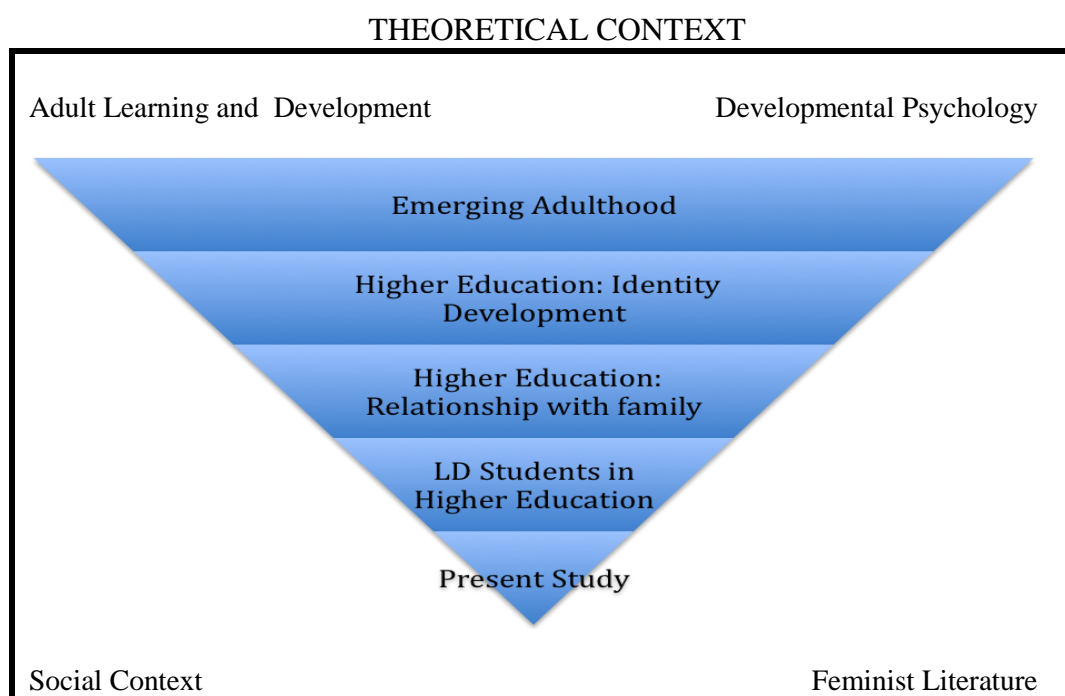
Although there is a large body of literature on individuals with learning differences, there is relatively little research that focuses on the individual student and the student's relationship with family. This study seeks to help fill that gap. It is my hope that this work will contribute to a growing body of research examining students who have learning differences in the context of the environment in which they develop.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Chapter

While literature on adult learning and development, developmental psychology, social context, and feminist thinking form the bedrock for this study, four additional bodies of literature must be examined in order to frame the broader context. The intent of this literature review is to discuss current leading concepts, theories, and data in these four areas of research affecting college students and the particular environment of American universities/colleges. The review begins by summarizing the young body of research on emerging adulthood, a field that forms the connection between studies of adult learning and development and adolescent development. The discussion then focuses particularly on studies about college students' identity development and the changing environment of higher education. Finally, the review concludes with an examination of current literature addressing the unique challenges of college students with learning differences.



Emerging Adulthood

The term *emerging adulthood* entered the literature in the year 2000, in an article written by Jeffrey Arnett for *American Psychologist*. Arnett is a Research Professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and editor of the *Journal of Adolescent Research*. In his article, he argued that “emerging adults”—those who fall between the ages of 18 and 28—are neither adolescents nor adults. They are a distinct developmental stage that falls between the two. Arnett’s brief article received tremendous attention because it addressed a gap in adult learning literature. By not identifying this group as distinct, adult learning theorists had been tacitly assuming that young adults and older adults are the same in the way they make sense of the world.

Demographic changes over the past 50 years have had an impact on extending the developmental path between adolescence and adulthood. Young people in primarily industrialized countries are getting married later, having children later, and staying in school longer (Arnett, 2000; 2004; 2006). In the United States, the median age of marriage in 1950 was 20 for women and 23 for men; by the year 2000, it grew to 25 for women and 27 for men (Arnett, 2004). College enrollment grew from 18 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in 1940 to 65 percent in 2000 (Arnett, 2004). The postponed entry into adult roles has allowed more time for exploration and change. Arnett (2004) describes five features of this developmental stage: the age of identity exploration, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.

The five features of emerging adulthood each address a separate aspect of development. The first feature is identity exploration, which involves the exploration of work opportunities, relationships, and religious beliefs (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Cote, 2006). Many emerging adults are

becoming independent of their parents and are exploring possibilities of work and love (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Aquilino, 1997, 2006). The second feature, the age of instability, is marked by the highest rate of residential change in one's life, which occurs from the late teens through the mid-twenties (Arnett, 2006, p. 9). For students in college, this time of exploration can lead to the choice to transfer to different kinds of higher education settings.

When addressing the third feature, the self-focused age, Arnett makes the point that there is a difference between self-focused and self-centered. In an article titled "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers" (2007), Arnett attempts to dispel a myth that has grown in recent years concerning individuals in the stage of emerging adulthood: that they are selfish and are refusing to grow up. Admitting that myths can be built around a kernel of truth, Arnett exposes exaggerations that he believes are not grounded in reality. A primary challenge of emerging adulthood is to explore identity and lay the foundations for an adult life in work and love. Individuals in this stage may be self-focused, but it should be recognized that there is considerable wisdom in using this time to fully investigate educational and occupational preparation. He believes that as the research base of this field of study grows, myths may be displaced, and an awareness of the subtleties of this developmental stage will grow.

One reason that Arnett chose the term "emerging adulthood" is that it seems to fit the way individuals in their late teens and early twenties describe themselves. In answer to the question, "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" he reported that 60% of emerging adults ages 18 to 25 responded, "In some ways yes, and in some ways no" (2006, p.11). Hence, he identifies the fourth feature, the age of in-between. Surprisingly, most emerging adults do not base their feeling of attaining adulthood on the traditional milestones of marriage, parenthood, or finishing their education. In studies involving questionnaires and interviews in a variety of

regions in the United States and other industrialized countries (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 2004; Malyeless & Scharf, 2003), the three criteria for adulthood most reported were: accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. It is interesting to note that these criteria are not achieved by sudden changes, but occur gradually over time. It is not surprising, therefore, that emerging adults often do feel “in-between” as they negotiate the gradual process of attaining full adulthood.

Arnett calls the fifth feature of emerging adulthood “the age of possibilities” for two reasons. First, this is often a time of great optimism, when emerging adults are hopeful that they will achieve what they want in life (Arnett, 2000, 2006). Second, for young individuals who have experienced difficult conditions in their family lives or high school lives, it is a customary time to move away and head in a different direction.

There are studies in the current literature that support Arnett in his assertion that emerging adulthood is a separate developmental stage. Jennifer Tanner (2006) writes that one of the strengths of Arnett’s proposal is that it includes both psychological concepts (self, identity, personal growth), and sociological concepts (search for occupation, geographic changes, cultural background). The work of Cohen, Kasen, and Chen (2003) is based on a longitudinal study that included both qualitative and quantitative data looking at the transition from ages 17 to 27. They focused on individual variation in assuming adult roles in four domains: residence, finance, romance, and parenting. Their findings show that young people changed roles and assumed responsibilities according to remarkably diverse timetables. While supporting Arnett’s thesis, this data emphasizes the variance in individual pathways.

The theory of emerging adulthood is still quite young; empirical research needs to be collected in order to further validate and enhance understanding. Aquilino (2006) has explored

transformations in family relationships during this stage of development. Although he concentrates mostly on parent-child relationships, he also addresses the less explored areas of relationships with grandparents, extended family, and siblings. He suggests research that would examine interaction and communication patterns and the role of extended family (kin), as well as samples that explore racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

The importance of Arnett's work lies in the fact he is encouraging more flexibility in how one views the development into adulthood. The path of development for many individuals in industrialized countries is longer than it has been in earlier generations. Yet, if this stage of development is not fully explored, the term "emerging adulthood" could turn into a mere label instead of a basis for a fuller understanding of the developmental process. Some questions warranting further research include: In what ways does emerging adulthood alter or challenge the family system? How does the change in familial relationships differ for emerging adults who are attending college from those who are in the work force? What role does religious or cultural identity play in the growth of internal voice and a strong identity (Barry & Nelson, 2005)?

There is a lack of qualitative research in this new and important area of research. Much of the current research is quantitative, collecting data from questionnaires, surveys, and polls. Qualitative methods are especially valuable when studying an area in which little is known (Arnett, 2006, referring to Briggs, 1989), and especially valuable when collecting the complex and multifaceted data involved when studying relationships between people.

Identity Development and College Students

Jeffrey Arnett's research on emerging adults, at first, did not include questions about identity development. "Like most psychologists, I was used to thinking of identity formation as an issue pertaining mainly to development during adolescence," he writes (Arnett, 2006, p. 8).

Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of eight stages of development had set the stage, placing in adolescence the crisis of identity versus role confusion. Forty years ago, Erikson commented on what he called "prolonged adolescence" (Arnett, 2006). Decades later, we are seeing more identity exploration during the years after high school, whether it be in the environments of work or post-secondary education. Arnett found that the theme of identity exploration came up again and again in his conversations with emerging adults.

A relatively new body of research is emerging that documents the process of identity development in American college students. Although some of these researchers use the terms *identity development* and *emerging adults* (Tanner, 2006; Aquilino, 2006; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Cote, 2006), and some use the term *developing self-authorship* (Baxter-Magolda 2001, 2004, 2009; Pizzolato, 2003; Taylor, 2008), they are all examining development of young adults within the college setting.

Theorists who discuss emerging adulthood in the context of higher education do so by trying to understand how this developmental stage fits into the rest of the life course. Labouvie-Vief (2006), from Wayne State University, is a pioneer in the field of development of cognition and emotion across the life span. She presents evidence of emerging structures of adult thought that begin to appear after the end of adolescence and "show rapid growth during the period of emerging adulthood" (p. 80). She draws heavily on developmental theorists Kohlberg, Perry, Kegan, and Belenky, who have all been influential in setting the stage for questions about cognitive development as individuals grow from adolescence toward adulthood.

Within the context of life span theory, Jennifer Tanner (2006) proposes that emerging adulthood not only represents a specific stage of development, it represents a crucial turning point in one's life. She agrees with Arnett's (2004) contention that it is during emerging

adulthood that identity explorations are most salient. At this point in the life span, she suggests, a shift occurs that she calls *recentering*. “Recentering constitutes a shift in power, agency, responsibility, and dependence, between emerging adults and their social contexts—primarily experienced by emerging adults as a period during which parent regulation is replaced with self-regulation” (Tanner, 2006, p. 27). In a similar manner, Marcia Baxter Magolda, Distinguished Professor of Education Leadership at the Miami University of Ohio, represents a key voice in the literature on identity exploration within the context of higher education. In 1986, Baxter Magolda initiated a study with 101 first-year college students to better understand learning and intellectual development during college. Now, over 20 years later, 35 of those former students still participate in annual interviews as they are turning 40. She uses the term *self-authorship* to describe the developmental surge that Tanner refers to as “recentering” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2009). Baxter Magolda defines self-authorship as the shift from relying on external voices to developing and trusting an internal voice. This is a term that was first used by Robert Kegan (1994). He described it as the creation of an internal identity that coordinates “values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions [and] interpersonal loyalties” (p. 185). Both Kegan and Magolda use this term to emphasize the active role that individuals take in creating their own identity.

The four stages of self-authorship span a developmental journey that begins at the first stage, *external formulas*, when an individual looks primarily to parents, teachers, and other authority figures to decide what to believe in. The second stage, which Baxter Magolda calls *standing at the crossroads*, is when the individual has experienced some dissonance and begins to question and examine beliefs, relationships, or sense of identity. The third stage, *becoming author of one’s life*, occurs when the individual begins to make decisions by listening to a

growing internal voice. In the fourth and last stage, called *internal foundations*, the individual begins to develop the confidence to listen to and rely on that internal voice. The process of self-authorship involves what Jeffrey Arnett calls the search for identity (internal voice) and a definition of growing into adulthood that involves owning or taking responsibility for one's self. Interestingly, this development is triggered by what Pizzolato (2003) calls "provocative experiences" and by what Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004, 2009) calls "disequilibrium." Similarly, Mezirow (2000) uses the term "disorienting dilemma" as a first step in the transformative learning process.

Baxter Magolda's framework begins to map out the path between adolescence and adulthood that Arnett is naming. Her work asks questions about what encourages development and what discourages it. She explores the question, "What blend of challenge and support is needed for growth to occur?" Tanner's use of the word "recentering" helps one to visualize the shift students may be taking. It is as if there is a swirl of strong wind, driven by the voices of authority figures—parents, teachers, and employers—gradually giving way to a soft breeze. After the storm of adolescence, the emerging adult settles into a period when he begins to develop an internal voice that helps him to make his own sense out of the cacophony of adult voices.

Identity development during the college years involves not only developing an internal voice, but also developing confidence in relying on that voice. What role does higher education play in this process? Does that role vary when dealing with marginalized populations on college campuses, such as learning-disabled, physically disabled, first-generation, or older students? Pizzolato (2003) found that high-risk college students, defined as students whose academic background, prior performance, or personal characteristics may contribute to failure or withdrawal, develop self-authoring ways of knowing—perhaps precisely because of the

obstacles they have overcome. “Findings suggest high-risk college students often develop self-authoring ways of knowing prior to enrollment in college, especially if the students possess low levels of privilege” (p. 797).

Family Involvement and Higher Education

The construct of emerging adulthood recognizes concrete changes in our culture. There have also been concrete changes in the culture of higher education regarding parental involvement. Parents are much more attached to their sons and daughters, and college students are more connected to their parents (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Some of the reasons for this are the cost of college, use of technology, changes in parenting, and demographics. Savage (2008) reports, “Today’s young adults are in frequent contact—50 percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds say they are in touch with parents daily (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007)—and three-quarters of students say they follow their parents’ advice (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007)” (p. 67). This involvement has been characterized in the media as a negative phenomenon. Parents are described as “Helicopter,” “Black Hawk,” and “lawn mower” parents, whose goal of protecting their children is their highest priority.

This is in direct conflict with the most widely used psychosocial theory of student development, which is the separation-individuation model of Chickering and Reisser (1993). The key assumption in this model is that successful identity formation must involve separation from family/parents. The term *individuation* is a psychological concept that refers to the mental “separation-individuation process.” As Cote (2002) explains, it is a process that begins in early infancy when the boundary is established “between the ‘me’ and the ‘not-me’” (p. 573). As students leave home and enter the environment of higher education, this theory assumes that a break with parents/family is necessary for the exploration of the new environment.

Recently, this model has been questioned in the literature (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004; Wartman & Savage, 2008). The competing model that has emerged in the context of higher education is attachment theory. The roots of this model are in the life course perspective (Aquilino, 1997), and the most well-known study, by Alice and Peter Rossi (1990), concluded that early parent-child relationships set the stage for relations in later life. Some researchers are applying the attachment theory model to studying the development of students when they go away to college. Kenny and Donaldson (1991) examined a sample of 226 first-year college students and concluded that secure attachment relationships with parents offer support, particularly in times of stress. Such support provides college students more confidence to explore their new environments and new identities.

Sorokou and Weissbrod (2005) explored attachment between college students and their parents in terms of types of contact, whether need-based or non-need-based. They defined need-based contact patterns as “support-seeking behaviors at times of need” and non-need contact as “behaviors reflecting contact sought for the purposes of touching base and maintaining contact” (p. 226). They concluded that a positive relationship existed between perceived quality of attachment and frequency of students’ contact with parents, both need-based and non-need-based. They also found that this relationship was two-sided, with non-need contact initiated by parents as well as students. This supports the research done in 1990 by Rossi & Rossi.

Some evidence in the literature strongly suggests that these two theories—separation-individuation and attachment—are not mutually exclusive, but are in fact complementary. Schwartz and Buboltz (2004) investigated the relationship between attachment to parents and psychological separation by giving the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment and the Psychological Separation Inventory to 368 undergraduate students. Their results strongly suggest

that there must be a successful balance between attachment and separation in order to facilitate healthy development.

Despite the differences of opinion regarding the significance of the parent-student relationship, many institutions of higher education have made a commitment to supporting appropriate parent involvement (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Johnson (2004), director of the first parents' program at Cornell University, believes that parents should be treated as partners. She reports that the number of members of the national organization Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement has increased from 30 colleges and universities in 1998 to more than 80 in 2004. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) also emphasized the importance of including and educating parents about college life, because parents are an important variable affecting their students' adjustment.

Studies in the literature that explore parental involvement tend to use surveys or questionnaires to gather data (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004; Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). There appears to be a lack of qualitative studies with detailed and descriptive data, which could perhaps inform a fuller understanding of communication patterns, changes in relationship, and themes that may develop over time between parents and their children who are college-student emerging adults. There also appears to be a lack of studies that focus on the unique relationship between parents and those students who have come to college with a history of learning difficulties or a diagnosis of a learning disability. The possibilities for further research are exciting.

Learning Disabilities and Higher Education

Students with learning disabilities (LD) represent the largest and fastest-growing segment of the population of college students with disabilities (Henderson, 2001). Wolanin & Steele

(2004) report that the percentage of students with disabilities who have completed high school increased from 61 percent in 1986 to 78 percent in 2001, and that students with learning disabilities constitute the largest single group in that population. Nine percent of the national student population attending college in 2002 reported having learning disabilities (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). Over the past 10 years, there has been a renewed interest in the particular needs of this population because more students with learning disabilities are graduating from high school and attending college.

The purpose of this section of the literature review is to review research findings that address the following questions: What are the differences between secondary and postsecondary settings for LD students? What are some of the factors relating to success for this population in post-secondary settings? How does the transition to college impact the role of parents? This review will summarize the literature focusing on changes in the legal context, the role of self-advocacy, and the concept of self-determination. Discussion will conclude with an update of issues relating to the role parents play with students with disabilities.

Differences Between Educational Settings

The differences between secondary education and higher education for students with learning disabilities are many (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Brinkerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 2002; Reis, McGuire, & Neu, 2000). Elementary and secondary education is compulsory, and students with disabilities may not be rejected. Higher education is voluntary, and students who do not perform well may be forced to leave the college. Academic policies and legal protections for students with learning disabilities differ significantly between secondary and higher education.

Three main laws that have an impact on students with learning disabilities are the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). The goal of IDEA is to identify students in elementary and secondary schools who have learning disabilities, and to provide services aimed at helping them achieve academically to the best of their ability. When a student is diagnosed with a disability, the school is required to create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to articulate both the educational goals for that student and the specific services to be provided. It is important to note that IDEA applies to students only through the high school level, and does not apply to students in higher education settings.

Students making the shift from high school to college also experience a shift in the legislation that guides their eligibility for, and access to, support services. When students enter a post-secondary setting, they are protected by two federal civil rights laws—the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act—designed to protect them against discrimination. The most significant difference between these laws and IDEA is that the post-secondary school is not affirmatively responsible for offering services; rather, the burden falls on the student, who is responsible for requesting and initiating services. In higher education, the student is protected against discrimination and promised equal opportunity, but there is no additional process—at least none delineated by law—aimed at ensuring success (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. viii).

The differences in the federal laws may affect the role played by parents and families of students with learning disabilities. The parents of elementary, middle school, and high school students are involved in annual Individual Educational Plan meetings and play a primary role in advocating for the services they feel the student needs. Once the student enters college, there are no longer any IEP meetings, and parents are not involved at all in the process of requesting

accommodations. The difference in federal laws also contributes to an abrupt change in the role that students must play as they enter this new educational environment.

Some Factors Relating to Success

Research suggests a variety of factors may affect post-secondary education success for students with learning disabilities. Knowledge of their disability, self-advocacy skills, and self-determination are a few of the most significant factors, in addition to time-management and study skills. The transition from high school to college brings significant changes in the amount of daily structure, time spent in classes, time spent outside of classes, and academic demands. These changes are challenging for students regardless of whether they have a learning disability. While adjusting to these new demands, students with learning disabilities, if they are to obtain the support that may be vital to their academic success, face the additional new responsibilities of disclosing their learning issues and articulating their accommodation needs.

Janiga and Costenbader (2002) created a study to assess the status of transition services for students with LD pursuing post-secondary education in New York State. The study surveyed coordinators of services for students with disabilities at 74 colleges and universities in New York State. Results suggested that the coordinators were not satisfied with transition services. Coordinators of services for students with LD at the post-secondary level were most concerned with the inadequacy of students' self-advocacy skills. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) came to the conclusion that high school transition teams need to provide students with a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and of the specific accommodations they need.

Self-advocacy implies an ability to function independently. One of the more important conclusions of the Janiga and Costenbader study was this observation: "Respondents noted that many students who come to college have relied too heavily on their parents and on special

education teachers. Students who are dependent on others may struggle when they enter college and are forced to take responsibility for their own educational services” (p. 467). The impact of the shift of responsibility for disclosing a learning disability and requesting accommodations cannot be underestimated. Students with learning disabilities who do utilize support in college and are able to advocate for accommodations have better rates of success (Vogel & Adelman, 1992).

Cawthon and Cole (2010) surveyed 110 undergraduate students at a selective four-year public university, focusing on four key issues: accommodations use, opportunities and barriers during transition, knowledge students had regarding their disability and services, and self-advocacy strategies. They found that not only do administrators feel that students lacked self-advocacy skills (Janiga and Costenbader, 2002), but also students themselves admitted to minimal knowledge about aspects of their disability that are necessary for self-advocacy and minimal preparation for how to articulate their needs. Only 9% of the students surveyed indicated that they had an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) and only 2% discussed, during their final IEP meeting, how to communicate to their university the services and accommodations they would need to be successful. This study highlights a serious concern affecting LD students’ ability to access appropriate accommodations in higher education.

In a study using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Kurth and Mellard (2006) looked at the accommodation process from the students’ point of view. A group of 108 students with learning disabilities from 15 community and technical colleges in California, Minnesota, and Kansas completed surveys asking about the accommodation process in their post-secondary education. In addition, 104 of the students participated in focus groups, discussing the process for obtaining accommodations. The study results supported the

researchers' hypothesis that ineffective and inappropriate accommodations may result from a process that focuses on disability type rather than on students' contextual and functional needs. Students appear to be offered accommodations based on a menu of services that they do not necessarily feel are useful. For example, 27.3% of the students who were provided an alternate testing location did not find the accommodation to be effective.

These results support the views of Dunn, Brown, and McGuigan (1994), who outline the model of "ecology of human performance" (EHP), which emphasizes the need to take context into account. The EHP model recognizes that "ecology, or the interaction between person and the environment, affects human behavior and performance, and that performance cannot be understood outside of context" (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 598). The context for students with learning disabilities in higher education is highly individualized; each student has distinct educational and personal goals, distinct degrees of financial and familial support, and a distinct profile of cognitive strengths and challenges.

In order to receive the accommodations that are most helpful, students are required to identify their needs and have the skills to articulate those needs. According to Field, Sarver, and Shaw (2003), these abilities fall under the central concept of self-determination, a concept that is receiving quite a bit of attention in the life-span disability literature. Field et al. argue convincingly that self-determination should be a central organizing concept in post-secondary programs for all students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) summarize the definition of self-determination as follows:

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of

one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (p. 2)

Sarver (2000) found a significant relationship between the grade point averages of students with LD and their levels of self-determination, as measured by the *Self-Determination Student Scale* (SDSS; Hoffman, Field, & Sawilowsky, 1996). Participants in this study were 88 students with learning disabilities who were registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities and had completed at least 30 hours of college credit. Sarver (2000) conducted in-depth interviews with four students as part of this study; all four discussed the importance of support for autonomy, a focus that they said differed from what they experienced during high school.

Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) developed a model of academic identity development for college students with learning disabilities based on interviews of 19 students with learning disabilities. These students were chosen because they had high scores on both the Student Self-Determination Scale (SDSS; Hoffman, Field, & Sawilowsky, 1996) and the Self-Determination Scale (SDS; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). Results showed that persistence influences competence. Interestingly, participants told as many stories of failed efforts as successful ones, sharing how the negative experiences were instrumental in their eventual successes. Considering the challenges and barriers that college students with disabilities face, Anctil et al. argue that both Ward's (1988) five traits underlying self-determination (self-actualization, assertiveness, creativity, pride, and self-advocacy) and Wehmeyer's (1995) four essential characteristics of self-

determined behavior (behavioral autonomy, self-regulated behavior, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) may contribute to positive outcomes for students with LD.

In an interesting contrast to this view, Leake and Boone (2007) contend that the concept of self-determination is rooted in mainstream U.S. values and may not be relevant for culturally and linguistically diverse youth, who may hold different values. They studied 20 focus groups consisting of a total of 122 youth, parents, and teachers in two locations, Hawaii and Washington, D.C. The researchers concluded that “perhaps the clearest message to emerge from transcript analysis was that varying conceptions of family significantly influenced the self-determination of family members” (p. 107). A number of participants noted that their conception of family tended to be much broader than the stereotypical U.S. nuclear family. Many participants tended to be more committed to family, and to identify more closely with family, than members of mainstream U.S. families. This study illustrates the importance of sensitivity to cultural factors when studying self-determination.

Family and Disability

It may be helpful to include a look at the literature outlining family systems. The process of parenting children and emerging adults with learning disabilities can be challenging, confusing, and lonely (Adelizzi & Goss, 2001; Roffman, 2000). The parents of students with learning disabilities, like the students themselves, face unique stressors when the children transition from secondary to post-secondary education. “The fact that all members in a family are affected by the actions of any one member is the central and perhaps most important feature of family systems theory” (Marshak, Seligman, & Prezant, 1999, p. 2). Each member of the family system connects to the others. When one member struggles, the entire system is affected.

In early studies of families with disabled children, researchers tended to define the unit of study as the child, neglecting the family as a legitimate area of inquiry. Later studies focused on the mother with particular emphasis on mother-child bonding. By the 1980s, the literature reflected an awareness that disabled children do not live in isolation, but rather live within some family system (Seligman & Darling, 1989)—and that families also do not exist in isolation, but exist within a social ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Waber, 2010).

When Resch, Mireles, et al. (2010) conducted focus groups with 40 caregivers of children with all types of disabilities, they found that four barriers emerged to positive parent well-being: access to information and services, financial barriers, school and community inclusion, and family support. These researchers concluded that many of the challenges are due to a lack of necessary environmental supports for parents. There is little current research examining the role of parents of college students who have learning differences. This study is intended to help fill that gap.

Chapter Summary

The four bodies of literature examined in this chapter frame the topic of identity development in college students with learning differences, within the context of relationship with parents. The topics start with the most broad, and they become more specific to the topic of this research. The first topic discussed was emerging adulthood, the developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood in industrialized societies such as the United States. The second topic was a review of relevant studies addressing identity development within the environment of American universities and colleges. Particular attention was given to Jennifer Tanner's (2006) description of the important shift she calls "recentering," and Marcia Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2004, 2009) model of "self-authorship." The third body of literature that frames this research is

family involvement in higher education, and the way such involvement has changed over the past two decades. Finally, the background of learning disabilities and higher education was discussed, with particular focus on three issues: the legal and academic differences between high school and college, the concept of self-determination, and the role of the family system of the individual with a disability. This particular qualitative study narrows those research topics further, to explore how college students with language-based learning differences find their independent voice within the context of family.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview of Chapter

The purpose of this study is to investigate identity development in college students who have language-based learning disabilities. Particular attention is given to the context of family and how a student's family relationships may affect the development of voice (Aquilino, 2006; Gilligan, 2003; Belenky et al, 1986). This chapter will describe the general approach I am taking to study this complex and rich topic, as well as what I bring to the role of researcher. Discussion will continue with a rationale of the specific case study design of this research project. This includes description of the sample population, demographics, and setting; three phases of data collection; and procedures used in data analysis and interpretation. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

Rationale for Research Approach

Based on both my personal world view and the particular issues I am addressing, I believe that the approach that best fits this research is qualitative in nature. The strength of this approach involves "detailed, descriptive data in deepening our understanding of individual variations" (Patton, 2002, p.16). The framework I utilize is constructivism. I believe that human beings construct meaning by interacting with and interpreting the world from within the context in which they live. Each of us views the world through our own unique lens—a lens that has been informed by cultural, historical, and social perspectives. The qualitative method of research is in harmony with this world view in its reliance on the participants' perspectives on a situation (Creswell, 2007).

A second reason for choosing qualitative research design is that it is best suited for an exploration in which little is known about the central phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2008). There are few studies in the literature that invite students with learning differences and their family members, both, to discuss life events from their respective viewpoints. I step into this project ready to learn from the participants. This is the type of research that encourages the researcher to be open to explore unexpected themes that participants may raise.

My choice to tell in-depth stories is directly related to the kind of questions I am asking. My questions involve an examination of relationships: the relationship between student and family, the relationship between the student's internal and external voices, and, finally, the relationship between the student who has learning differences and sociocultural expectations. Story-telling seems the best way to express these many-layered relationships and to honor the many layers. Patton (2002) contends that stories and narratives "offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings" (p.116) that color our sense of self.

It is because of the relationships between these particular individuals and the cultural and social context that I find the term *voice* particularly poignant. Students who have language-based learning differences struggle with both receptive language and expressive language. The term *voice* is used to describe speaking, to express meaning, and to describe the stance of an author in written language. Because the participants in this study have struggled with language, particularly in the environment of higher education (where language is central to the purpose of the institution), it is particularly important to give them the opportunity to tell their stories and allow those stories to be heard.

Students with learning disabilities are commonly defined by their many scores and percentiles on a myriad of cognitive and achievement tests. Much of the research with the

population relies on quantitative data that does express important information, but does not serve the purpose of unveiling voices that are not usually heard. It became clear to me that the term *voice* resonated with my research goals when I came across a discussion of the metaphoric use of the term in *Women's Ways of Knowing*:

In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: “speaking up,” “speaking out,” “being silenced,” “not being heard,” “really listening,” “really talking,” “words as weapons,” “feeling deaf and dumb,” “having no words,” “saying what you mean,” “listening to be heard,” and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others.” (Belenky et al., p.18)

Students who are in college and who have language-based learning disabilities also struggle with “speaking up” and “having no words”; students who are in college and who have language-based learning disabilities also struggle with the urge to be silent.

Just as Carol Gilligan contended that experiences of men do not represent all human experience, I contend that the experiences of conventional learners do not represent the experience of all learners. The stories of students who learn differently will add to our collective knowledge of identity development within the context of relationship with family.

The Role of Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher assumes a unique place. Patton (2002) contends that the researcher is in fact the instrument, the measurement tool, used to collect, organize, and interpret data. Maxwell (2005) agrees, adding that “the research relationships are the means by which the research gets done” (p. 83). Every researcher brings personal and

cultural history, a variety of knowledge and experiences, as well as biases and assumptions to the subject being studied.

I bring to this project over 20 years of experience working with students with learning disabilities in a variety of settings, including two years in a county house of correction, seven years at a community college, and 15 years at a four-year liberal arts college. I bring my experience as a diagnostician and evaluator. Finally, I bring my experience as a mother of two sons who, at the time of this writing, are both college students.

In my current position as Senior Lecturer in Curry College's Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL), I work individually and in small groups with college students who have diagnosed learning differences, to help them become aware of—and sometimes change—deeply held values, assumptions, or habits of behavior. We discuss their unique strengths and challenges, both inside the classroom and out. We plan semester goals and develop strategies to meet those goals. My role is to listen and decide, often intuitively, what skills, strategies, or assumptions we need to work on. The purpose of this relationship is clear: to help students meet their challenges with honesty, responsibility, and dignity. I bring this experience, and this awareness, to this research project.

In addition, for the past 15 years, in my role as learning disability specialist and diagnostician at Curry, I have conducted numerous comprehensive psycho-educational evaluations, each of them aimed at better understanding a student's unique learning profile. When assessing a student, I work with a blend of quantitative and qualitative data that I collect, analyze, and integrate into in-depth reports. I rely on intuitive as well as concrete information as I analyze patterns in each student's approach to learning. I have found these research skills to be invaluable in this project.

Finally, I bring to this project my experiences, questions, concerns, and worries as a parent of two sons currently in college. The passionate curiosity I have in regard to this topic, rooted in my personal as well as professional life, fuels this project.

Multiple Case Study Approach

Results from my preliminary pilot study of four students and two parents indicated that the information I received from participants had tremendous depth. The data was personal, complex, and multi-layered. One interview per participant appeared to only begin the investigation, and I was left wanting more information from each participant. I also realized, as a result of the pilot study, that if I could access multiple sources of information (as well as allow for multiple interviews), a fuller picture of what I am studying could emerge. Consequently, I have chosen the case study method. This is a method that is particularly well suited to studying a “contemporary phenomenon in depth within a real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 2).

The case study approach is an intensive and systematic approach to qualitative research that is crafted uniquely for each situation. I am particularly drawn to this approach for two reasons. First, it emphasizes studying each “case” not separate from, but connected to, its context. Each of my cases consists of a student as the primary unit of analysis and the family as the context. The case study approach rests on the assumption that it is important to investigate the relationship between the primary unit of study and the context, and this is exactly the information I am exploring in this study.

Second, this is a method that relies on multiple sources of evidence to investigate complex phenomena. I have found in my years working with students who have learning differences (and my pilot study supported this) that this particular population of students could have difficulties with expressive language that may affect the ability to articulate experiences.

Consequently, I believe it is crucial to gather information in multiple ways and not rely solely on one verbal interaction.

In a multiple case design, between four and six cases (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009) are purposefully chosen to explore deeply. I have identified six cases—three female and three male student—as critical cases for this multiple case design. As described in greater detail below, the process of my research has been determined systematically in an effort to address, most directly, the purposes of the research and to optimize the anticipated utility of the results.

The Process

The first step in my process was to describe my research project to the Chief Academic Officer of Curry College and the Director of the PAL program. These members of the college community function as gatekeepers; I could not have conducted the research without their support. The second step was to obtain approval for the project from both the Lesley University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Curry College IRB. The third step was to describe the project, and in particular the criteria for selecting participants, to PAL faculty members, and to ask for their recommendations of appropriate students.

Sample and Population

Both the site and the participants of this study have been purposefully selected (Creswell, 2009) in order to focus on the particular research question I am addressing. The site is Curry College, chosen because it is home to an internationally respected academic support program, the Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL). The second and more pragmatic but equally important reason for selecting Curry College as the site of my research is that I have been a faculty member in this program for the past 15 years. My familiarity with the school administration and the PAL faculty provide me not only with greater access to students than I

would be likely to have elsewhere, but also with a real-world context enabling me to select student participants whose experiences fit the particular criteria for this study.

Curry College is a small four-year liberal arts college in Milton, Massachusetts, with an emphasis on developmental education. The college mission emphasizes “a high respect for the individuality of every student and a developmental approach to learning that maximizes opportunities for achievement.” Today Curry has a population of 2,000 students (500 of whom receive services for specific learning disabilities) and offers 20 majors and 65 minors and concentrations. It has students from 31 states and 7 countries. Curry has long prided itself on connecting to each and every student.

The Program for the Advancement of Learning (“PAL”) was first established in 1970 by visionary educator Dr. Gertrude Webb in order to serve a specific population whose needs were not being met by traditional institutions of higher learning. The PAL program is designed for students who have the intelligence and drive to succeed in college, but whose history of learning differences posed a major obstacle to their success. It is an ideal community from which to draw study participants who have already been selected as typical of the college-age population but for one notable difference: their established learning disability.

Participants

I recruited 15 students of a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds who were recommended to me by PAL faculty members. I conducted a screening process, which consisted of a 15-minute face-to-face conversation in which I described the project and assessed each student’s willingness to talk openly about his or her experiences and to volunteer a family member to be interviewed. The optimum number of cases for the study was six; the minimum

was four (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007). After the initial screening, six participants—three female and three male—were selected according to the following criteria:

- Student has a diagnosed language-based learning disability with a Verbal Comprehension Index (VCI) in the below-average to average range and a Perceptual Reasoning Index (PRI) in the average to superior range as measured by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS-IV). The purpose of the higher limit for the PRI is that it helped to screen out students with nonverbal learning disabilities.
- Student is a college junior or senior who has participated in the Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL) program at Curry College for at least one academic year. The reason for this criterion is that by the time students reach their junior year, they have chosen their major; I wanted to ask the study participants how they went about selecting a major and how involved their families were in the making of that decision.
- Student agrees to be interviewed, and to volunteer a family member to be interviewed as well; permits me to review his or her academic and testing records; and signs releases to that effect.
- Student is not currently enrolled in one of my classes.
- Student has no known psychiatric illness.
- Student has not been diagnosed with a nonverbal disability, Asperger's syndrome, or autism.

These last two criteria were included because students with co-morbid psychiatric conditions may need extra support from both family and the institution, and students on the Asperger's continuum, including those with nonverbal learning disabilities, may experience the additional challenge of misperception of social cues and interactions with others. The purpose of this

research was to focus on students with learning differences; including students with co-existing conditions could confuse the results of the study.

Student Demographics

<i>Student's Chosen Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Home</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Religion; Race</i>
Case #1 Sarah	F	21	Senior	Communication	Hollywood, CA	Mom, Dad, 2 step-sibs	Jewish; Caucasian
Case #2 Bill	M	22	Senior	Psychology	Long Island, NY	Mom, Dad, 2 sibs	Jewish; Caucasian
Case #3 Katherine	F	22	Junior	Education Non-licensure	Canton, MA	Mom, Dad, 10 sibs	Catholic; Caucasian
Case #4 Ricky	M	21	Junior	Criminal Justice	West Orange, NJ	Mom, Mom, 1 sib	Protestant; Caucasian mother, Black children
Case #5 Isabella	F	22	Senior	Education Non-licensure	Cape Cod, MA	Mom	Catholic; Caucasian (Italian descent)
Case #6 Shlomo	M	22	Senior	Psychology	Rhinebeck, NY	Mom, Dad, 1 sib	Jewish/ Catholic; Caucasian

Data Collection

I conducted a pilot study in the spring of 2011, in which I interviewed four students and two family members, with the primary purpose to clarify interview protocols for both the first student interview and the family member interview. Yin (2009) recommends using a pilot project to refine data collection plans and develop relevant lines of questions (p. 133). I did make minor

adjustments to both protocols, as well as adding one last question: “What advice could you give fellow students?” or “What advice could you give fellow family members?”

There were three phases of evidence collection: (1) an initial interview of the student, (2) an interview of a designated family member, and (3) a closing interview with each student. In addition to the interviews, I accessed information from other sources, including home visits in four out of six cases, participant records (including psycho-educational evaluations), and a final meeting with each student in order to check data with participants and to actively collaborate by sharing themes and requesting input.

Before describing the three phases of data collection I must mention two additional points. First, when I conducted interviews, I was gathering many types of information, both explicit and implicit. I believe that in addition to the skills of listening, speaking, and writing, interviewing involves keen observation skills—which is why I include observation as one of the sources of data collected in this study. Second, it was important to me to write research memoranda before and after each interview I conducted. In them, I described the setting, personal reactions, surprising statements, and any stand-out moments. These journal memos were an important addition to the data collected.

Phase 1

In the first phase of data collection, I set up individual interviews with each of the six students. These semi-structured interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for future reference. Each meeting was scheduled to take approximately 60 minutes. At this first meeting, I briefly outlined the nature of my inquiry, explained the consent form, and responded to any questions the participant had. The interview protocol was structured around asking students to reflect on four critical time periods in their lives: when they were first identified and diagnosed

with learning differences; when they decided to enroll in college; when they made the transition to college; and, finally, when they selected their college major.

Phase II

The second phase of data collection entailed interviewing a family member designated by the student. I asked each student to select a family member whom I could interview, and I asked the student to explain why that family member was selected over others. The family member interviews were conducted privately (without the student in attendance), and took place at the family member's home (in four of the cases), in my office at Curry College (in one case), or via Skype (in one final case). Each family member interview was scheduled to take approximately 60 minutes and was audiotaped and later transcribed. The interview protocol focused on the same four critical time periods of the student participant's life, but this time from the perspective of the family member. The four critical events were: the first diagnosis, the decision to attend college, the transition to college, and the choice of major.

After all six interviews were completed, I then examined thoroughly the documentation relating to each student, including past testing, school reports, educational plans, and other relevant information. It was important to not review these materials before the interviews, because I was concerned that reading the documents would result in forming preconceptions of the students' experiences. I wanted to rely on what the participants chose to tell me. After the interviews, a thorough examination of the documents could add to my understanding of each student's situation at the milestone times on which I was focusing.

I used the results of the first 12 interviews to inform the interview protocol and questions asked during the final six interviews of Phase III. Creswell (2007) calls this type of design an

emergent design, because the full design of the project emerges as a result of information gathered.

Phase III

The third phase of data collection occurred in a second individual interview with each student. This second interview was also audiotaped and transcribed. The protocol for the meeting was informed by the information gained in phases I and II, with the purpose being to have a wrap-up conversation during which I asked additional questions (some based on information gained from family member interviews). Each student was given the opportunity to share observations and/or questions. This final meeting also served as a “memory check.” I shared with each student a brief summary of what I considered salient points from the first student interview, and I invited the student to correct, amplify, and/or confirm my accounts. As part of this final phase of data collection, each student was given a copy of a poem I constructed from the first interview, and each student was asked whether the poem sounded like him or her. In addition, each student was asked to describe how it felt to read his or her own words in a condensed format.

Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis

Information analysis in this project took place on an ongoing basis, and the information obtained in each phase of the study informed the way the project preceded. Analysis of data took place concurrently with collection of data. The first phase of data collection was used to help shape the questions asked and themes pursued during the second phase, which involved interviews with the student’s chosen family member. The information gathered during both of those phases informed the questions asked and subjects addressed during the final interview with each student.

Two methods of data analysis were used in this project. The first was a general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data, based on three broad tasks outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 10-11): *data reduction*, *data display*, and *conclusion drawing* or verification. *Data reduction* is the process of selecting, simplifying, condensing, and focusing data; it occurred throughout the entire project until the final report was complete. This is considered a form of data analysis because the reductive process is based on decisions I make, in the course of assessing the information I have gathered, about what is important and what is not. *Data display* involves assembling and organizing information into maps or matrices designed to make the data more accessible to practitioners. My *conclusions* are drawn based on the data that was categorized, organized, and analyzed.

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend that early analysis will “help you cycle back and forth between thinking about existing data and generating strategies for collecting new and often better data” (p. 50). Here are the steps I took in early analysis:

- Although I used a transcription service, I found there were many mistakes. I spent time going through each interview word for word to make corrections. I decided to include as many of the “ums” and “likes” as I could.
- After correcting each transcript, I reprinted it with a wide, one-third page, margin on the right. I listened again to each interview, this time not even looking at the words. By allowing myself to really listen, I was able to focus on and jot down impressions, themes, questions, and whatever struck me as important and compelling. I was aware that by using the software program HyperRESEARCH, I would be focusing only on written text—so I wanted to listen again to be sure I would connect the tone and voices to that text.

- After I completed all 12 interviews, I filled out a Contact Summary Form (Miles & Huberman, p. 53) for each of the six cases. This was helpful because I was beginning to accumulate information in different places and I needed to consolidate. I had the interview, my notes on the interview, and I also had my research memoranda or field notes. The four categories of information on my form were:
 1. The main issues or themes that struck me during each contact
 2. A summary of the information I obtained (or failed to obtain) in response to each of the target questions
 3. Other information or matter that struck me as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important during each contact
 4. Any new (or remaining) target questions to consider for the next contact with the participant

My second method of data analysis was based on the *Listening Guide* voice-centered approach created by Carol Gilligan (2003). Much of my study resists numerical analysis, and requires instead that I listen to the words and silences of the students and families—what they say as well as what they don't say. The *Listening Guide* method of analysis “is a series of steps, which together are intended to offer a way of tuning into the polyphonic voice of another person” (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003, p. 157). Not only is this an appropriate way to actively listen, it is also a style that comes naturally to me and that I utilize frequently in my work with students. Each person's voice has roots in a distinctly personal and cultural history. Voice is a bridge between our inner world and the outer world. As a lifelong pianist, I am drawn to a musical analogy: To understand a person, just as to understand a symphony, requires that one be sensitive to both harmony and dissonance, to range and rhythm, to counterpoint and

single melody. This method of analysis is most appropriate when trying to investigate the inner world of participants by studying the way they express themselves in in-depth interviews and conversations.

As outlined by Gilligan, there are four steps to the process of voice-centered analysis. I outline below how those steps corresponded to specific tasks I undertook when reviewing the interview transcripts and other materials I gathered.

Step 1: Listening for the Plot

I first read the transcript of each interview multiple times, in order to identify what stories were being told: what is happening, where, with whom, and why. What is the larger social context of the stories? Second, I read through, and noted in my research journal, my own emotional responses. This was done in an effort to separate my personal responses from the material that the participant brought to the conversation.

Step 2: I-Poems

This second step focused on the individual (the “I”) who was sharing information, in order to observe the distinctive rhythms of this participant and to observe how the participant speaks about himself or herself. I underlined every first person “I” within a particular passage, along with the verb and other important words, then pulled out those phrases in the same sequence. The result was the creation of an I-poem that I believe captured something meaningful that was not directly stated. The I-poems highlighted themes, variations, harmonies, and dissonances that arose at different points in the interviews.

Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voices

In this third step, I returned to my research questions about the development of identity and what supports or impedes such development. By looking separately at each question I asked

and the interviewee's response, I focused on different strands of thought or narrative that spoke to the research questions. I asked the question: Is there evidence of contrapuntal voices, voices that combine two melodic lines? If the appearance of different voices emerged, I read through the text listening for one voice at a time, and coded it separately. This approach took into account the complex nature of the material I was gathering and allowed for a multi-layered approach to listening to the participant.

Step 4: Composing as Analysis

After multiple readings of the text, identifying the story, separating out my personal reactions, outlining I-poems, and investigating multiple voices, I was then able to pull together what I learned about each participant in relation to the research questions I am asking.

After each interaction with a student or family member, I recorded impressions, reactions, and immediate insights in a research journal. These journal entries, along with my other written observations, were then entered into a contact summary form. Each transcript was uploaded into the qualitative analysis program HyperRESEARCH; text was coded for emerging themes and explanatory comments were written in the margins.

Each case was developed into a complete case description. The descriptive approach helped to identify the appropriate patterns to be analyzed (Yin, 2009). A cross-case analysis was made, outlining similarities and differences and searching for connections across emergent themes.

Ethical Considerations

I began this research project by creating a consent form that informed participants of the purpose of the project as well as how they would be protected if they chose to participate. Each participant was informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that the individual

could withdraw at any time, without repercussions. The consent form described the purpose and the procedures of the study. Sharing the purpose was intended to invite each participant to feel some involvement in the project. Participants were told that names would not be used in data collection or in the written dissertation. Each interviewee was asked to choose a pseudonym that would be used in order to guarantee anonymity. The typed transcripts were identified by this pseudonym instead of the participant's real name, and only the researcher and the transcriber would have access to the transcripts. All data collected would be strictly confidential, with one caveat: If I believed that any participants were at risk of hurting themselves or someone else, the information would be shared discreetly with appropriate college staff.

Although no clear risks of harm were anticipated, it was possible that sharing sensitive and personal issues could elicit unexpected feelings. I allowed time at the end of each interview to acknowledge that possibility and to offer support options depending on the situation. Of course, the opportunity to discuss feelings or perceptions may also prove a benefit for participants.

Validity

Creswell (2007) considers the term validation to mean “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings” (p. 206). Here are some of the strategies I used to contribute to the validity of this project:

- *Building trust with the participants.* Many of the interviews lasted much longer than the anticipated 60 minutes, because I tried to relax into and enjoy each conversation. I traveled to four of the six students' homes to meet family, drink tea at their dining room tables, pet their dogs, and, in one case, meet extended family members.
- *Writing copious notes of my observations after each interview.*

- *Creating a method of investigation that matched the particular questions I asked.*

This was a means to enhance methodological validity.

- *Using multiple sources to get at the questions I was researching.* This included:
 - Comparing the parallel stories of parent and student;
 - Inviting student participants into the project by sharing my ideas and asking for their input; and
 - Soliciting their views about the credibility of the findings and interpretations by sharing and discussing with them their I-poems.

Reliability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that reliability in a qualitative research project means looking at whether findings are dependable and consistent with the data collected. I used two strategies to ensure reliability. First, I attempted to document the rationale for all the choices I made in analyzing and interpreting data. Second, I met with each student at the end of the project and asked the student to read and give feedback on the I-poem constructed out of that student's own words. Students were included in a discussion that helped to determine the themes and patterns in the findings of the study.

Limitations of the Study

A key limitation of the case study approach is that it is not possible to make generalizations based on so few participants. Although each case was explored in some depth, the case study approach is limited to a small sample. In addition, the research sample was limited to students from Curry College, a small, private four-year liberal arts college outside of Boston, Massachusetts. Those limits restrict the ability to generalize the study's results to other more diverse populations.

A related limitation resulting from the nature of this qualitative inquiry is the researcher's role as the instrument. I collected data by in-depth interviewing, close observation of the participants, document review, and participant collaboration. I wrote copious notes in a research journal before, during, and after meetings with participants. Monthly memos were written for my committee members in order to summarize and share events, impressions, and thoughts. In each of these situations, I (as the researcher) had to constantly choose what I thought was noteworthy information to gather and express. It needs to be acknowledged that who I am and what I bring to this study impacts the project.

A limiting condition of the particular design of the study was that I have relied on students' and family members' memories of their experiences, and some of those memories span many years. Memories may have been influenced by emotion, by re-telling, or by cognitive adaption. Some of the stories recounted had the appearance of being a shared story in the culture of the family. Since I was looking at how the participants made meaning of the experiences that were related, what was most important was how the descriptions were related (word choice, facial expressions, patterns of speech), not necessarily the proven facts of the experiences.

A final limitation was that the population I was studying was a very specific population of students under the large umbrella of learning differences. There is a tendency to apply findings of students with learning disabilities to students with all types of learning profiles. That may not be appropriate. It is highly possible that results from this study of students who have language-based learning issues may not apply to students who have nonverbal learning issues, Asperger's/autism, or AD/HD.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research methodology used to study the complex topic of how students with learning differences find their internal voice, within the context of family. The choice to have participants tell in-depth stories related to question prompts was rooted in the constructivist view that human beings create meaning by interacting with the world around them. The decision to have both a student and a family member of the student's choosing tell the story from each of their perspectives and to consider each duet a "case" flowed directly from the research questions of this project. The use of multiple case studies (six), multiple interviews per case, and multiple sources of data collection allowed for an in-depth and robust study. While purposefully selecting participants from the Program for the Advancement of Learning at Curry College who have language-based learning challenges, I attempted to choose students who differed from each other in cultural background, socio-economic status, and family constellation.

Three phases of the study were described. The first phase involved in-depth interviews with each of the six students, focusing on four critical time periods. The second phase entailed in-depth interviews with each of the parents (including four home visits) focusing on the same four critical time periods. The third phase involved a thorough review of past psycho-educational evaluations, and a final meeting with each of the students to share I-poems and discuss the study.

The choice to use the *Listening Guide – A Voice Centered Approach* (Gilligan, 2003) as one of the methods of data analysis was described in some detail. Since this study required that I listen to the words and the silences of the students and family members, and since I was attempting to use interviews as a way to investigate the inner worlds of participants, this was a particularly appropriate form of data analysis. The chapter concluded by discussing ethical considerations relating to this study and the limitations inherent in its design.

Chapter 4

SIX PORTRAITS AND SIX POEMS

Overview of Chapter

The general focus of this study is identity development in college students who have language-based learning disabilities. Some of the particular questions I am asking are: How do students with language-based learning differences find their *voice*, their core identity, the way they conceive themselves? How does that voice develop? Does relationship with family affect that development? If so, how? Because examining the questions involves seeing a larger picture rather than viewing the student in isolation, I must begin the analysis of data by describing the students within their particular family contexts. Before dissecting and classifying data, it is important to tell the story of these six individual and unique cases. I begin here with the big picture. In chapter 5, I move on to a discussion of specific themes and findings, and in chapters 6 and 7, I step back into the big picture as I present interpretations, implications, and conclusions.

In telling these stories of context, I am drawing on interviews with the student, the interview with the parent chosen by the student, and, where applicable, my observations of the environment where the parent interviews took place. The method I am using involves full immersion into the student interviews, the parent interviews, my research notes, and past documentation, while also being attentive to an intuitive pull towards key points in each story. At the end of each portrait, I present the I-poem for each student as a vivid representation of the self-identity of the student who is the topic of each portrait.

Case #1: Sarah

I met Sarah three and a half years ago, when she was in her first year at Curry and was assigned to work with Lori, my office mate, as her PAL professor. Sarah works with Lori on

developing strategies to help her cope with the shift to college. Lori and I share a large office with two windows on each side, giving us the sunniest office space in the Gertrude Webb Learning Center. The environment we have worked to create is comfortable and relaxed. Sarah meets with Lori for two sessions a week, so over the past four years we have gotten to know each other through informal conversation. Sarah and I discovered that we enjoy chatting about food (she is a wonderful baker), Judaism (the religion we share), and traveling (she has done much more than I!). Sarah enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed for this project, and she volunteered her mother to be the family participant. Her mother agreed to be interviewed via Skype, as Sarah's family lives in Hollywood, California.

Of the six participants in this study, Sarah lives the farthest from Curry College. When asked why she chose to go to college so far from home, Sarah says, "*I was . . . ready to get out of Beverly Hills. Ready to get out of Los Angeles, out of California, and I knew from a very young age that I wanted to come to the East Coast.*" When asked how her family felt about this, she shares that her mother did not finish college and wanted her to have the experience she didn't have. Her father, she found out later, did not want her to go so far away, but supported Sarah's decision because it was what she wanted.

Sarah lives with both of her parents. Her mother is a business executive who was first married at age 18, and divorced six years later. She married Sarah's dad when she was 29. Sarah's father is a CPA with a Master's degree in Accounting. He was also married previously, and he has two children from that marriage. Sarah is the only child of this marriage. Both Sarah's stepsister and stepbrother were diagnosed with learning issues when they were younger and have struggled in school. Her stepsister, in Sarah's words, "*never really went to college.*" Her stepbrother went to a university, failed out, transferred to community college, then left to attend

acting school. Sarah mentions that she does not want to be like her stepsister, who *“has some social issues and can’t keep a job.”*

Sarah’s history with learning difficulties is long and complicated. She was diagnosed with severe language delay and language processing problems when she was in pre-school, as reported by Sarah, her mother, and past documentation. Sarah reports that she didn’t speak until she was around 2 years old. She worked with a speech therapist from pre-school through the eighth grade. She describes her early reading experiences this way: *“I was a very late reader. I was able to read in the third grade, but I still had a lot of difficulty. . . . I would jump over the words and guess at words.”* Sarah had resource room support throughout elementary and middle school, and she worked with a tutor outside of school twice a week during high school.

Although Sarah has received quite a bit of academic support throughout her school years, it was not until coming to college that she started to finally understand her learning issues. When asked whether any teachers sat down with her to explain the results of testing, Sarah said, *“They never really explained. I didn’t know I had, like, I didn’t know the name of what I had until I came to college.”*

Like other participants in this study, Sarah has experienced changes in her relationship with her parents throughout her college years. She discussed her growing respect for her parents, and their growing respect for her: *“The change with my parents is, I really respect them more in a way? Yeah. . . . And, like, they, I think, treat me like more an adult now than they did before.”* She shared several stories suggesting that her mother was the parent more involved with her schooling before college and her dad as the parent on whom she has primarily relied during college. She describes her mother to me this way: *“Like, she was always e-mailing teachers and always I’d go to her for help in school because my dad just didn’t understand how to explain it*

to me.” Yet, while in college, she describes her dad as the one who understands, especially when she learned that he also struggled when he was in college. He disclosed to her that he had trouble passing the CPA exam and had to take it multiple times. This helped her to open up more with him. I found it interesting that when asked to choose a pseudonym, both mother and daughter chose the name “Sarah.” I later learned that “Sarah” was the name of the student’s paternal grandmother. (To avoid confusion, the mother yielded and selected a different, but equally biblical, name: “Rachel.”)

When I meet with her, Sarah is preparing to graduate soon, and she discusses the difficulty she is having deciding where to go after college. She describes being pulled both toward home and away from it: *“I want to stay here. I fit in here; I don’t fit into LA. . . . But at the same time I really want to go home because my dad is 72 and, like, my little cousins are growing up—. . . but mostly it’s because of my dad. I want to spend as much time with him as I can.”* This is a time of transition for her reminiscent of her transition to college—a time of stress, excitement, fear, and thrill.

Sarah’s I-Poem

I don’t exactly know what age
 I do remember in pre-school
 I went to a different school
 I think
 I really don’t remember

I was a very late reader
 I was able to read in the third grade
 I still had a lot of difficulty
 I want to say—my first word wasn’t until
 I was, like, maybe one and a half or two?
 I was very late
 I was, like—I’d start talking and then, like, mumble

I live in Beverly Hills
I'd go to her for help in school
I was also afraid of my dad for a while
I don't know why
I didn't know I had like,
I didn't know the name of what I had until I came to college

I had great friends
I had great support
I enjoyed most of my teachers
I did go
I did a lot of bonding during that time
I've been doing it for years
I'm a first-degree black belt
It was, like, my safe place

I don't understand why I don't get this
I talk to them
I think the real trust started
I call him now

I was really excited for college
I was ready to get out of Beverly Hills
I knew
I wanted to come to the East Coast
I wanted to come
I knew I wanted to go to college
I felt it was the next step for me
I want to go somewhere where there was support
I did
I believe
I got on that campus and I said I need to get out of here (not Curry)

I found this out later
I think that part was hard on him
I think he understands
I think they were just happy that one of their kids showed an interest in college
I mean...

I walked on campus
I said this is the best of the places
I think my parents were rooting for Curry
I was like, okay
I came here

I was really excited
I feel
I think
I went on vacation
I worked in my gym
I was hanging out with friends

I've never been away with my parents before
I had full-on attention
I was really excited
I felt homesick during the Jewish holidays
I've been so used to, like, certain things
I still feel a little homesick around the holidays
I go to a really good temple

I was really upset when my parents left
I had had a hard summer
Like, I was, "Don't leave me"
I weighed the most I ever weighed
I changed my whole eating routine
I had a thyroid problem

I really respect them more in a way?
I mean, I can't stand my mom's lovey-doveyness anymore
I think they treat me more like an adult now
I'm close to them on Facebook

I'll call my friend
I'll call her mom
I talk to each parent every other day
I switch off, like
I texted a lot to my mom and my sis
I thought that was really healthy
I was traveling
I only talked to her on the phone twice
I was really freaked out
I thought I was too old for this
I didn't have any support
I think it changed me
I have to be more aware that each person has a different background
I just feel more go-with-the-flow
I was like, plan plan plan
I do know whatever I do in the future
I have to be traveling

I have really smart friends
I wasn't
I didn't
I would just sit there

I have something
I realized that with an LD
I may work two to three times more than someone who doesn't
I can do that

I really wanted to be a teacher
I love kids
I wanted that my whole life
I just . . .
I didn't want to do it anymore
I came here with no major
I had a horrible experience
I was thinking
I put myself into a frenzy
I went home
I was, like . . .
At first I was, like . . .
I go in and she asked if I might possibly want to work in the Speaking Center
I asked her if I could let her know
I talked with other people
I said, "Yes"
I began to love my major
Even though I was not in so great a place
I was constantly tired
I didn't know how to deal with it
I continued
I got invited to the Honors Scholars program
I was part of One-Curry and peer education groups
I never thought I could be "that" student
I look back
I love being involved
I am now involved in one place
I learned
I feel like here I've learned to go through things

I don't know what I am going to do when I graduate
 I am scared shitless
 I'm just, like, getting started here
 I need to sit down and look at a few possibilities
 I'm hoping
 I had a really tough time
 I called my father
 I was crying
 I feel like he, or at least when I have difficulty, is understanding
 I don't think my mom has an LD
 I'm never doing math with my father
 I'm trying to explain it
 I relate a lot with him
 I love them both, of course

I really don't know what I want to do
 I'm super lost
 I may cry

I thought a few things
 I think
 I should go home
 I don't want to

I want to stay here
 I fit in here
 I don't fit in LA
 I'm not a size zero
 I don't have fake boobs
 I mean
 I love it here
 I feel like I have a lot of connections
 I will not have the same opportunity
 I would be mooching off my parents

I really want to go home because my dad is 72
 I'm just, like . . .
 I'm, like . . .
 I want to spend as much time with him as I can
 I really do feel that life is more superficial out there
 I love, love, love being in my house
 I just don't fit in there

That's what I like about college—that I'm here, but then I'm there, too

I'll figure it out
I feel, like, a lot calmer

I hate making mistakes
I really don't like it
I feel like a screw-up when I make a mistake
I was traveling
I didn't book a hostel
I arrived
I got there and it was dark
I don't know where I am
I was by myself
I should have figured this out
I used, like, my emergency fund
I got to sleep in a bed with blackout blinds
Still, I felt bad

I think going abroad, though, has taught me, like, it's okay sometimes

Case #2: Bill

Bill pokes his head into my office: *"We're meeting at 3:00, right? I may be a few minutes late because I am coming from my exam. Is that okay?"* "Sure," I respond, "that's no problem."

I had talked with Bill briefly just a week ago to discuss whether he would be interested in participating in this project; that's when we set up this appointment. His PAL professor enthusiastically recommended him because he is a psychology major, interested in these kinds of studies.

Actually, when I search my memory I realize that the first time I met Bill was more than four years ago, when he was first preparing to enter college. Bill took the Summer PAL course, a three-week transition class for students with learning differences who will be attending Curry College's PAL Program in the fall. The purpose of the course was for students to become familiar with the physical layout of the college, the academic expectations, and the available support services, as well as to get to know some of the students and professors they will see

when they begin their studies. I was teaching Summer PAL that year, and although Bill was in my colleague George's class, we sometimes chatted about music and psychology—interests we realized we shared. When I asked him about participating in this study, he seemed interested and very willing to give his time.

Bill is a senior currently in his fifth and final year at Curry. He is friendly and quick to smile, though he tells me he is shy with people he does not know. He is dressed all in black—black T-shirt and baggy black jeans—with a gold chain hanging from his neck. Stocky, with long sideburns, he could pass for the lead drummer in a band. I later learn that he was indeed a singer in a band throughout high school; he describes it as the most positive experience of his high school years.

Bill comes from Long Island, New York, which is where I interview his mom several weeks later, and where I meet his dad, one of his two sisters, a few cousins, and, of course, the new puppy. After getting lost driving around an area in Long Island filled with warehouses and shopping malls, I finally make my way to their comfortable residential street and their welcoming home.

Bill had asked his mother to be the family member to be interviewed. She used her grandmother's name, Helen, as her pseudonym. After making each of us a cup of coffee, she settles into a chair in the dining room, apparently relaxed and eager to tell Bill's story.

As I did with each of the parent interviews I conducted, I begin by asking for some demographic information. Bill's family consists of his dad, who has a Master's degree in Business and works for an insurance company; his mom, Helen, who has a Bachelor's and works as a physical therapist; an older sister who graduated from college with a double major in

Spanish and Economics; and a younger sister who, though only in her first year of college, is already determined to double-major in Math and Economics, with a minor in Spanish.

I ask Helen to describe the time when Bill was first diagnosed with learning issues. She immediately starts discussing the frustrations he and she both experienced when Bill was in first and second grades. It soon becomes clear that Helen was very involved with Bill's schooling throughout his pre-college years:

I really sat with him all through his whole—until he graduated high school. I sat with him every day to do homework with him. He could not do homework by himself at all, and I had two girls that were completely independent, that I did not have to help at all. They were super-genius. Now I always thought Bill was very smart. He has a lot of common sense. He knows so much stuff. . . . We never made him feel like—we always said to him, “You are just as smart as your sister. Maybe math and Spanish is not your thing, but she can’t write a paper like you can write a paper.”

Later in the conversation, we find ourselves discussing Bill's decision to go to college. Helen admits to me that it touched her deepest fear: *“We did not even think he’d be able to graduate high school.”*

Bill shared a similar story with me, describing a difficult and challenging academic journey. His memories of elementary school are painful:

I was slow. It took me a bit longer than most kids. I remember probably in first, second, maybe even up to third grade, during our reading time during the school day, we would be split up into different groups, and—I can’t even remember what the names were, but there were different animals. There were several of them, but there was one group that

was obviously the slow one and there was one that was obviously the advanced one, and I remember the slow one was dolphins. And I was in dolphins.

Middle school for Bill was “*complicated*,” and high school was when he was at his worst academically. His struggles with math and Spanish were so intense that “*it was almost a deciding factor of not graduating high school.*” Not only did Bill go on to graduate from high school, but by making the decision to take a slightly lighter course load each semester, thereby extending his time at Curry College by one year, he will soon graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology.

Bill’s I-Poem

I’m pretty young; I’m first or second grade
 I remember going to doctors
 I didn’t really understand
 I don’t know
 I had trouble in school
 I was always running around
 I was hyperactive
 I started taking medication
 I remember the slow one was the dolphins and I was in dolphins
 I know I was in dolphins

I did really, really well in some classes and really, really poorly in others
 I kind of butt heads a lot
 I started to not like school anymore

I had a lot of trouble with math
 I did poor in Spanish
 I did poor in math
 I didn’t do great in language arts
 I knew what was going on

I had constant issues with medication
 I was in a band
 I was a singer

I'm looking at colleges
I'm trying to graduate
I knew then
I guess I just thought I was supposed to
I guess that's the next step
I looked at a few
I liked this
I found this school
I actually only applied to this one
I was looking
I was interested
I talked to a few students
I just knew I was going to get in
I, we, actually applied early decision

I remember
I remember just kind of throwing those bits of advice out the window
I did Summer PAL
I really liked Summer PAL
I made friends really quickly
I'm very sociable
I'm very interested in having friends

I'm actually even more in touch with them now than I was then
I never really made that big an effort
I was busy doing other things

I talk to my dad every couple of days now
I talk to my mom a lot too, weekly
I guess I usually go to my mom first
I would go to George first
I was able to do more of that kind of stuff on my own

I really have no idea
I don't even know what I want to do
I started out as a graphic design major
I did not like it
I was not marketable
I got very discouraged
I got discouraged

I never actually technically declared myself
I was enrolled
I ended up going psych
I like my psych classes
I think they thought it was great
I think my dad got excited
I'd like to say no
I don't know

I've significantly reshaped who I am as a person

I would go to school and
I would come back
I would go home
I kind of went home
I've had to make my own
I've had to burn bridges
I had one friend who
I've always been that friend that everyone kind of came to
I blamed myself about it
I don't any more
I burned that bridge of friendship when he became really a monster
I was able to see it

I think it was gradual
I think that is a bit part of going from the high school mindset of what it means to
 be a man, and an adult mindset
I'm in that now
I really like that course

I can only do work for short bursts
I have AD/HD
I've a lot of anxiety and some depression
I definitely believe there are different ways
I guess I feel better of myself as a learner
I'm able to deal with issues easier
I think things more logically and rationally, than emotionally

I was just kind of like a white-hot ball of emotions when I started

I just did it
 I just kind of—I just did it
 I guess I stopped taking medication in high school
 I tried
 I found ways to cope with it
 I use my phone
 I make reminders
 I schedule
 I got an iPhone so I just started doing it there
 I mean
 I guess
 I think
 I have allowed them to do that
 I never really got myself into a lot of trouble
 I don't really drink
 I don't mess around with drugs
 I guess
 I guess

I had a conversation with my dad
 I go home and me and my dad will talk about politics or, like, recent scientific discoveries or interesting theories or stuff like that—things that are actually more cognitive

I've always taken lighter semesters
 I was just
 I decided to withdraw from something and do one more semester

It was a big question if I was going to even graduate high school
 No one thought I was going to get in

Case #3: Katherine

The day I meet Katherine to talk about whether she wants to participate in this study is the first time I have ever met her. A senior at Curry College, she seems easy to talk to, comfortable in herself, and interested in telling her story. We jump right into discussing when she was first diagnosed with learning disabilities (seventh grade) and how her difficulties with school led to the testing that resulted in her diagnosis. Her PAL professor, who describes her as hard-working and caring, recommended Katherine to me enthusiastically: “You will love talking

to her!” When we meet for the second time for the actual interview, we simply pick up from where we started—and before we know it, an hour has gone by.

Katherine comes from a large family. She has 10 siblings: 7 sisters and 3 brothers. Her mother is a part-time nurse and her father is a doctor; their 11 children range in age from 11 to 27, with Katherine, age 21, the fifth in line. She chooses her mother, “Brianna,” as the family member for me to interview. Because her family lives in the next town over from Curry (although Katherine herself lives on campus during the school year), it turns out to be convenient for Brianna to come to the campus, which is where our interview takes place later the same day, after I finish up with Katherine. In the course of the 60 minutes I will spend talking with Katherine’s mother, she will receive three phone calls and take them, apologetically: One is from her husband, another from one of her sons, and the third from Katherine herself. This is a busy mother, to be sure.

It is striking to me how connected Brianna seems to be to each of her children. Before we even begin discussing Katherine, Brianna asks to talk for a moment about Katherine’s older brother, who also has been diagnosed with a significant learning disability and who is finding his way through a two-year degree in culinary arts. Brianna describes his difficulties and asks for my opinion about specific strategies that may be helpful to him. Then the tape recorder goes on, and Brianna focuses, laser-like, on Katherine: She recounts the details of Katherine’s academic history, year by year from kindergarten until the present, with compassion and clarity. Then the tape recorder clicks off, and Brianna takes the occasion to ask a question about another sibling, the youngest brother, who is also struggling in school. After the interview, I write in my notes: “This is a mom of 11 kids who truly knows each of them, worries about each of them, and, most important, believes in the unique strengths of each of them.”

When I spoke with Katherine earlier in the day, she readily admitted to me that, of all the people in this large family, it is her mother with whom she talks the most about her academic difficulties. I asked Katherine about her first few weeks in college, and she described intense homesickness that came quickly—and went away just as quickly. After having been so excited about the prospect of going to college, Katherine found herself surprised by her initial difficulties:

Well, moving in, my first week, I got really homesick—like, really homesick. . . . My mom wanted me to stay down here. She would be, like, she didn't mind if I came home, but she didn't want me coming home the first couple of weeks, because she wanted me to get used to being here—but I was really homesick—like, I cried myself to sleep for a week.

The following week, Katherine did go home for the weekend, and she saw her mom and her family. As she explained it to me now, she “*just needed to know*” that her parents would be there for her. When she came back from that weekend, she felt much better.

I asked Katherine for more information about what it was that triggered her homesickness, and she shared an interesting story. It turns out that Katherine's first-year college roommate found a boyfriend within the first week of school and moved in with him almost immediately. Katherine found it unexpectedly challenging to live in a room alone. At home, she had always shared a room with at least one sister; these days, when she goes home, she and her sister actually share a double bed. Being alone was not a comforting experience.

Like other participants in this study when asked about their early education, Katherine described her difficulties processing language and learning to read. She had a particular fear of being left behind:

The teachers talked to my mom. They said that I needed extra time. They realized in first grade that I was a little slow, but they didn't know why I was so slow—and then when my mom talked to me about staying back, I got really mad.

Katherine did not stay back in first grade, but she did stay back in third grade. By that time, she responded in a matter-of-fact way: *“They kept me back a year, but I was already young for my grade.”* She managed her studies with support in a resource room through middle and high school.

Katherine, whose father is a doctor at a local hospital, told me a poignant story dating from her senior year of high school. At the time, her heart was set on becoming a radiologist, so her dad arranged for her to shadow a couple of people in the hospital's Radiology Department. She *“absolutely loved it”* and was sure she had found her life's calling. Later, when Katherine was preparing to apply to colleges, she chose only those schools that offered appropriate training for her chosen profession. She was rejected by every one of them. Her mother had learned that Curry College, only a town away, had a support program for students with language-based learning disabilities, and only as a last resort did Katherine apply. She was admitted, and ultimately chose a major in Early Childhood Education. She says now that for all her interest in radiology, she knew it would have been a struggle to study in a program that emphasized the sciences, an academic area she finds particularly challenging. After her heart breaking, and then mending, she is now quite matter-of-fact: *“I may still want to do [radiology], but I hear how hard it is and I just don't want to go through all that.”*

Two themes of Katherine's story are her admitted need for support and her ability, and determination, to get that support. Of all the study participants, she is the only student who talked about religious faith as being one of her strongholds. *“Faith is a big part of me, big part,”* she

says. *“Like, I still go to church every week here. I always felt like He, God, is a guide to me through college. I pray to Him all the time.”* Katherine also credited her PAL Professor as being essential to her college success. *“Having a support and knowing Jean is there for me, and that I can go to her with anything and she’ll help me—just knowing that, made me much better.”*

Like Sarah, Katherine is graduating this year and has a mix of emotions about the next step. Her plan is to live at home and work as a pre-school teacher for a while. Although she says, *“I don’t want to graduate!”* she also seems excited about beginning a new chapter.

Katherine’s I-Poem

I didn’t get diagnosed until seventh grade
 I was put on a 504 plan
 I needed extra time
 I was a little slow
 I was so slow
 I got really mad

I don’t remember
 I started speeding up and, like, finishing my work on time
 I was already young for my grade
 I was doing fine
 I got to middle school
 I got tested
 I just had extra time on tests
 I had to be on an IEP plan
 I wasn’t allowed to take the tests in the resource room
 I would see that teacher three times

I thought
 I remember
 I always could read
 I would have to go back and read it again
 I struggled with word problems
 I mean, I can read them
 I have to go back to read it again
 I can hear what they are saying
 I don’t always comprehend it right away
 I think it was because I wasn’t in the resource room my freshman year

I only talked to my mom about it
I needed someone to help me

I was thinking about what I wanted to do for a living
I wanted Radiology
I shadowed a couple of people
I absolutely loved it
I didn't really think of colleges until my senior year
I visited
I had gotten a new guidance counselor
I didn't like
I wasn't very close to her

I applied to the University of Hartford
I finished my application early
I come to find out
I was hesitant about it
I called them
I fill out the application
I wrote my letter
I got a call on my cell phone from Curry
I had an interview with Tish
I said I'm going there

I did ice hockey only freshman year
I didn't get that much playing time
I just bagged it
I was busy applying
I just focused more on my schoolwork
I just
I love sports
I always have
I grew up with sports
I did start field hockey
I just stopped
I will try it out

I was actually really excited
I was excited to get out of the house
I didn't want to live at home
I'm excited to have a roommate
I was very excited
I couldn't wait
I was counting down the days in summer
I worked

I got really homesick
I was like holding back the tears
I just broke down
I said, "Oh, I don't want to be here"
"I want to go home, just for a day"
"I just want to see my mom"
I cried myself to sleep for a week

I'm home for the weekend
I came back and I was fine
I needed to know that they would...
I was basically on my own
I think that's why I got more homesick, too
I actually met people in the boat cruise
I started interacting with those kids
I had a boyfriend
I basically have the room to myself
I think it was better to have a single because I got more done
I didn't like it at first
I just got used to it

I want to be a teacher
I came undecided but I want to be a teacher
I have many talks with Jean
I decided I wanted to do CyC
I didn't declare it until the end of my sophomore year
If I still want to do Radiology
I can always go to a community college
I don't think I want to do that right now
I like this major
I still want to do it but I hear how hard it is
I just don't want to go through all that again
I'm not going to go back to school

I talked to Jean
I didn't want to take those
I was like
I know
I had to take an extra year
I was in tears
I didn't want to take an extra year
I wasn't there
I didn't know
I was in tears
I was a mess
I called my mom

I was bawling my eyes out
 I talked to the coordinator
 I would have to take a summer class
 I took the summer course
 I'm back on track
 I will actually graduate

I changed my adviser
 I totally kept telling Jean
 I don't know what I would do without her
 I would never switch to anyone

I don't talk to them about classes or anything unless they ask
 I . . .
 I called them and just talked to them about it
 I think it changed for the better
 I matured more
 I don't think I would've done as great as I have if I didn't have my family
 I've learned to be on my own
 I was treated like a baby when I was at home
 I'm in the middle
 I'm the fifth
 I'm kind of like in the middle

I think it's changed for the better
 I feel like I'm moving forward
 I still have the same relationship I've had with them
 I mean, our relationship has grown stronger
 I don't fight with any of them actually
 I still have a roommate at home, my sister
 I've always been extremely close with them
 I always talk to her (mom)
 I can talk to them about anything I need to
 I'm very, very close with them
 I was close to my dad's mom
 I went to see her a lot
 I used to visit her at least once a week
 I'm very close to my grandparents

I found who I am and my values and morals, when I got here
 I've loved it
 I don't want to graduate

I was talking to my roommate
 I hear myself talk
 I was like, “Oh my God! I know what I want to do!”
 I was, like—this is the first time I felt that way
 I realized I knew much more about what I wanted
 And I went home to my mom to say it

To know I have that support behind me made me successful
 I can go to her with anything

I think it was hard at first
 I always felt like I wasn’t
 I love them to death
 I wouldn’t have it any other way

I came to realize my mom and dad love me for who I am
 I did the best I could
 I still go to church every week
 I always felt like he, God, is a guide to me
 I pray to him all the time
 I was part of a youth group
 I still do the same stuff that I did in high school
 I couldn’t be able to live without my faith

I’ve been playing piano since second grade
 I’ll play the piano to release stress
 I’m taking Jazz next semester
 I sing, too, when I’m playing
 I usually go a half-hour early and play before class starts

I call my mom every day

I don’t have a problem telling people I have a learning disability
 I think it boosts my confidence
 I know I can do it
 I can work that much harder and do the same work they do.

Case #4: Ricky

I first met Ricky during the summer of 2009, on the first day of the three-week Summer PAL class. I remember a quiet football player who was one of three Black students in the group of 38. Every morning, he would aim for the one comfy chair in my office (where we met each morning before breaking into smaller groups for the day), sit back, and take a short nap before

activities got under way. Ricky was in my group of eight students. His huge smile and quick humor stood out. Academically, what I remember most is how much he hated writing. He was honest and straightforward in explaining that he came to Curry College to play football, not because of any particular interest in academics. Frankly, by the end of that summer course, I was a bit worried about how he would manage in the fall.

Because Ricky has volunteered for this study, I now have the opportunity to fill in the missing pieces of how he managed after that Summer PAL class. Although we have had some conversations over the years, it is only now, as I interview him, that he shares with me the story of his background.

Ricky was born in New Jersey to a White mother, with whom he lives, and a Black father, whom he has never met. His mother told him that she did not know his father very well and has had no contact with him. Ricky's mother, Maggie, is the youngest of 10 children. After becoming pregnant with him, she moved in with one of her sisters (who lived alone), and lived there for the first five years of Ricky's life. When Ricky was 8, Maggie met Lisa, the woman with whom she would eventually move in and create a family. Although they are not legally married, they consider themselves a married couple. Two years after they moved in together, Lisa, who is White, became pregnant by a Black male donor (a choice she and Maggie made so that they would have a child who would look like Ricky), and she gave birth to Anna. Ricky and Anna share not only the color of their skin, but also a family constellation of two White moms and many cousins.

I learn more about Ricky's background from my interview with his two moms. (I have asked each student participant to volunteer a close family member for me to interview; Ricky

was the only one to volunteer both of his parents. Maggie and Lisa both tell me they want their real first names used for this study.)

It is the week before Christmas when I drive up to a small white house in West Orange, New Jersey, with a chain-linked fence and two beautiful boxers nosing their way through the fence at the side of the house. Anna, a girl of 9, is with them. A 3-foot-high illuminated Santa Claus stands in front of the house, next to a large clock that is counting down the days and hours until the holiday. Inside, the house is small, cluttered, and thoroughly comfortable. As we sit on the living room couch, Maggie points to several overflowing cardboard boxes and explains that they had just cleaned out the apartment of her grandmother, who passed away unexpectedly last week.

Lisa tells me she and Maggie moved to moved West Orange because they wanted to live in a town with a bit more diversity than their prior neighborhood, in which, as Maggie describes it, Ricky was “*one of about three Black kids, and the other two were troubled special ed kids.*” Driving in, I had noticed that this town had everything from huge mansions to very poor neighborhoods. Ricky’s house is in a working-class neighborhood, with houses close together; only a block away, the houses were huge and set back from the road.

Maggie reports difficulties with Ricky starting in his early childhood:

He was, believe it or not, having issues in day care. As you start really little and as you move with each group, you’re required to be more and more in control of yourself, basically. And you got to sit and move from task to task. And he didn’t do those things very well. And he would turn the day care on its ear some days.

On the advice of the day care director, Maggie had Ricky tested at the Hackensack Institute for Child Development, where, at age 4, he was diagnosed with AD/HD. With tears in her eyes,

Maggie discusses the painful exchange she had with Ricky's kindergarten principal a year or so later:

The principal kept calling me every day and tossing him out, tossing him out, and tossing him out. And finally I went there and said, "We can't keep doing this. . . . Something has to happen here." And she, the principal, actually said to me, she said, "You're going to be lucky if he don't end up in jail." So I said, "No, I disagree." I said, "We're going to fix it." And she said, "I'm telling you now: You're going to be lucky if he doesn't end up in jail."

The decision was made for Ricky to transfer to an alternative school for children with learning difficulties, which Ricky attended, and where he thrived, until graduating in second grade. When he returned to the regular school system, he received resource room services and extra help with reading. He was prescribed medication for AD/HD throughout middle school.

By the time Ricky was about to begin high school, both Maggie and Lisa had grown concerned about the kids that Ricky was hanging around with. They decided he needed the structure provided by a military high school, so they sent Ricky to a boarding school in Pennsylvania. As Ricky explains the decision to me now, *"Like, I wasn't hanging around the right people. My mom wanted me to go to military school to get me away from where we're at, because I wasn't hanging around, like, the one-hundred-percent crowd. . . . She wanted me to make it, pretty much."*

Ricky describes the experience of military school as *"being on lockdown pretty much 24/7."* He enjoyed playing football, but when it was time to leave, he *"wanted out."* Although Ricky had been uncertain about the next step, both moms had long been clear that they wanted him to go to college. He recalls now how, ultimately, he came to agree with them:

It happened toward the end of junior year that something happened that made me realize, "Hey, maybe I do want to do this." But I don't know what it was. I think it was one of my teachers who said something that made me think, "Hey, I could do this."

Maggie, Ricky's biological mom, found out about Curry College and suggested it to Ricky because it had both a support program for learning disabilities and a Division III football team. It was the only school to which Ricky applied. He was wait-listed for two weeks before receiving his admissions letter.

The transition from a small military high school (the graduating class was 85) to a college of 2,000 was dramatic. *"I come to Curry,"* says Ricky, *"and it's totally a 360 spin. I could do whatever I want, wear whatever I want."* Ricky started growing his hair (which is now tied in shoulder-length dreadlocks dyed red at the ends), and he decided to get a few tattoos. Each tattoo is a symbol that, he says, expresses his identity. The first, which he got with three of his cousins two days before he started at Curry, is a Chinese symbol on both forearms that means "cousins." Next to the symbol on his left arm is the phrase, "Cousins from the beginning"; on the right arm, it says, "Friends until the end." Ricky's second tattoo is on his right upper arm. It is a large sword bearing the word "Warrior" on the blade, with a three-leaf clover (representing his Irish blood) on one side and an African-American symbol on the other. Ricky's third tattoo consists of two mottoes stretching lengthwise from one arm to the other: "Born to Live" on the right arm, "Live to Succeed" on the left. Explains Ricky: *"This tattoo means, 'Don't be scared of the world.'"*

Ricky's first year in college was difficult. He was on academic probation twice and he was almost expelled once. He was angry and emotional, yet by his second year he clearly made the decision that he wanted to be at Curry. He describes the day when he received the letter

saying he would be dismissed from Curry College (this was after he had brought his first semester's GPA of 0.46 up to a 2.3, just shy of the 2.5 he was supposed to have brought it to):

"So I read the letter and it said that I'm being dismissed from Curry, and I just collapsed. I just collapsed to the floor. "What do you mean?" I was so confused. I did do significantly better—and I was being dismissed?" Ricky asked me, as his Summer PAL professor, to write a letter of support for him, which I did, as did another professor. *"Yeah, it worked,"* he says now:

In July, I got a phone call from somebody from the financial office, saying that I got back in. And I thanked them, like, twelve thousand times. Like, I was tearing up. I was, like, "I got to move back!" I have a 9-year-old sister at home, and what was I going to say to her? That I failed? I can't do that to her.

Since that pivotal moment, Ricky has decided to become a Criminal Justice major with a Business minor. He had to give up football for one year in order to focus on his studies. He has a girlfriend. I can see that he smiles much more often these days. Weeks later, when we meet for his final interview for this study, he read his "I-poem"—the words he spoke to me, organized into a poem. *"Yeah, that's me,"* he responds. *"But it's not over yet."*

Ricky's I-Poem

I was 12, that's when they sat me down
 I couldn't stay seated for half of the time
 I do remember one time when I was getting tested
 I looked at him
 I told him, "That's not right"
 I just know that story because my mom remembers that story too
 I went to pretty much a psychiatrist
 I was on medication
 I stopped when I came here
 I didn't like medicine
 I don't like how I felt on it
 I wasn't hanging around the right people
 I would get in trouble one day if she left me there

I was out there for probably 10 months
I probably saw them maybe 20 times
Summer, I went home
I go home for Thanksgiving

I don't remember
But I do remember
I don't know what happened during that summer
Hey, maybe I do want to do this
I think it was one of my teachers who said something
That made me think, "Hey, I could do this"
I just want to be out of school
I didn't care about future plans
I want to be done with the military

I applied to Curry and one other school
I didn't finish the application
I ended up accepted, like, two weeks later
I don't know
I honestly just wanted to play football
I was the one doing it
I needed to do that application

I wasn't working
Did a couple of bad things, but
I was used to it
I was at school for 40 months out of those four years
I'm used to this
I was used to it
I graduated with 84 people

I didn't
I wasn't cool
I didn't like that idea, wants to join the Air Force
I called him stupid
I came to Summer PAL
I was a little sad
I called him
I hated him being there
I said I didn't like it
I don't know
I guess you could
I kind of turned to partying and being with my friends just to get off my mind
I don't want to think about it at all
I'm partying
I would just start thinking

I would call him
I was fine
I would be in tears just talking to him
I'd be so mad

When I found out on moving day
Me and my mom tried to pursue to find my father
I was scared
I had my first conversation with him in 19 years
I had so many feelings
I was on the phone with him

I'm, like, "You just talked to me and now you want a (paternity) test?"
I'm going to school this summer
I'm dealing with my best friend

I'm, like, "What's going on?"
I could see my mom's face
I was, like, "No, something is wrong"
I'm expecting her to say
I'm confused
I'm angry
I started crying
I don't know what the hell is going on

I'm also coming from being on lockdown pretty much 24/7
I come and it's totally a 360 spin
I kind of sit down and –

I was like the class clown
I didn't care
I didn't want nobody talking to me
I pushed him
I got kicked out and he didn't
I lost my best friend
I was in a mode, like, "Nobody bother me"

I got my finals back
I was at home
I was expecting F's
I come to find that, only one F
I'm mad happy
I was, like, "That's way better than I thought"
I mean, nobody else is going to be happy, but
I'm good
I'm good with that

I told my parents . . .

I don't know
I just went to the books
I mean I did a little partying but
I was more in the books
I went from a 0.46 GPA at the end of the first semester to a 2.35 in the second semester
I was like, "Alright, everybody is going to be happy now"
I did it
I didn't really go to PAL
I would show my face
I finally got a 2.35
I'm driving back home from the gym
I was like, "What are you talking about?"
I read it and it said that I'm being dismissed from Curry
I just collapsed
I just collapsed to the floor
I was so confused
I got you to help me out
I got one of my guidance counselors
I wrote my own letter

I got a phone call
I got back in
I thanked them, like, twelve thousand times
I was tearing up
I was like, "I got to move back!"
I have a 9-years-old sister
What was I going to say to her?
I failed?
I can't do that to her

I came back and I did better
I was on academic warning
I did better
I get C's and D's I think
I was on probation again
I would have to explain to them
I'm back here now
I took a year off football to get my credits up
So I have a base to sit on
I'm going to be here the next summer

I love cowboy movies, anything with a gun in it and law enforcement
I liked it
I was on that
If I could grow up and be like that
I always wanted to be a cop
I want a fallback
I want to open a barbershop
I want to go to barber school, too
I've cut hair before
I want to get better at it

I can do it
I can't do it by myself
I told myself to go to the library
I did tons of homework
I got to figure out for next year
I'll be fine
I start out working with them
I should be fine
I got business to take care of

I was scared to talk to my mom
So, I don't tell her
But now, I talk to her a lot more
I tell her, like, what I wouldn't have told her two or three years ago
I kind of like winged it one day telling her something
I did bad to some situation and she took it pretty fine
I just kept doing it little by little
I told her I was drunk
I was under-age
I probably would have got yelled at
I probably wouldn't have told her

I fake out when she is around
I was being rebellious
I bought it (tongue ring) back in high school
I got it when she told me not to get it
I was a senior
I was 18
I got it when she told me not to get it
I just take it out and
I put it in before I go to sleep
I took it out eventually
I'd probably tell her after it's out

I'm just doing what I want to until someone tells me
 "Alright you have to pick and choose"
 I'll make different choices
 I want to do what I want to do

I have 7 straight aunts
 I probably got like 10 aunts
 I have to help
 If I do something bad, I don't only get yelled at by my parents
 I get yelled at by her
 I would go over there all the time trying to help
 I work on the house
 I would go to help her in the backyard

I was 8 and she met my other mom
 I was 10 and my other mom got pregnant with [Anna]

I'm actually going to try out
 I'd probably go to barber school
 I'd probably start looking into
 I started thinking about policing
 I'd probably be like 25
 I actually start getting serious
 I go from there

I just think that
 I wish I had used my family more in the beginning, like high school
 I'm close with them

I get hit from both sides
 I've been followed around because I was Black
 I've been rejected from my barber's shop because
 I walked in with my mom
 I walked in there and my mom is White
 I've got stuff on top of me, having two moms
 I've got [Anna], she's Black and White

Case #5: Isabella

In contrast with Katherine's family of 13, Isabella comes from a family of two: Isabella and her mother. Her mother works as a waitress and lives in a three-room apartment, attached to two other one-floor apartments, directly under the Sagamore Bridge on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The only other family members Isabella mentions are her dad, who left during

her first few years of life and now is remarried and living in South Carolina, and her grandparents, who live a few towns away. Although Isabella describes her relationship with her mother as sometimes stormy, her mother will turn out to be a willing and interested participant in this project.

When I finally meet Isabella's mom, it's uncanny to me how much she looks like Isabella. Both have huge dimples that erupt when they smile, and bright gray/blue eyes that sparkle when they laugh. I was not surprised to learn that Isabella is majoring in Early Education and that she loves little kids; she has that bubbly, outgoing personality that is the hallmark of so many teachers of young children. When I later ask Isabella's mom to tell me what name she wants to go by for this study, her response is forthright: "I'll use my name, Lisa, I've got nothing to hide." Like her daughter, Lisa will impress me as honest, blunt, and strong.

For now, though, I am getting Isabella's story. This student reports that she was in the first grade when her teacher called her mother to a meeting and expressed frustration at Isabella's lack of progress in school. As told by Isabella, the story goes this way:

My mom went to a meeting, and my teacher stood up and said to everybody that I'm not learning, and that she thinks I have a learning disability. And then, like, I don't know, like, a couple of days later, my mom had me up in Boston and I was being tested.

The result of the testing was a dual diagnosis of AD/HD and dyslexia. When I meet with her later, Lisa describes that meeting as intimidating, and she says the idea of her child having a learning disability came as a jolt:

I was shocked. And I just looked at her and I said, "What do you mean, a 'learning disability'?" And she goes, "Wait, I can't diagnose her, Lisa. The kid wants to learn, and

I can't teach her. That's all I know." So I says, "Okay." So, now, I got a lot on my plate and I'm not quite sure what to do with it.

Lisa recalls going to a support group for help. The first time she went, she just sat in the back and watched. *"So, I cried, and then I went back the second time—the second meeting, spoke to a lady, and I told her, I says, 'I'm new—and you're talking about my kid. Where do I go from here?'"* Lisa received advice, and eventually she contacted an advocate to support her when she felt that Isabella was not getting the services she should be receiving. After failed attempts at two community colleges, Isabella eventually ended up at Curry College. Lisa—who did not go to college herself—describes feeling relieved that Isabella could get the help she needed from her mentor in the PAL Program. Now, when Isabella struggles, Lisa will often suggest that she give a call to her PAL professor, Michelle. Just as Lisa reached out for help when she needed it, so she now encourages Isabella to do the same.

Back to Isabella. As I talk with her, she shares several stories about enjoying the connections she made with various learning disabilities teachers during her elementary and middle school years. *"I got pulled out of my regular classes and I was brought to a different room,"* she recalls. *"I loved it."* The advocate suggested that Isabella use the Wilson Reading Program, a multi-sensory, structured, and systematic way to teach reading. Lisa and the advocate both had to fight to get the school to hire a teacher qualified to use the program. But once Isabella started on the Wilson Reading Program, her reading improved tremendously.

Two themes recur throughout Isabella's story: standing up for what you need, and standing up against negativity. Starting in high school, Isabella herself began to attend all her Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meetings. (One can't help but believe that by asking for help and attending support groups many years earlier, Isabella's mother had successfully modeled the

ability to ask for help when needed.) Similarly, Isabella refused to take “no” for an answer. Isabella says that when she was diagnosed with dyslexia, After her testing results diagnosed Isabella with dyslexia, *“The doctors said that I’d be lucky if I knew my ups from my downs and my left from my right.”* They questioned whether she’d even be able to finish high school. When Isabella graduated, she says now, *“I remember my mom telling me, ‘So, you defeated the odds there, kiddo.’”*

During high school, Isabella participated in a Civil Air Patrol program and became very interested in entering the military. This caused some tension with her mom, because Lisa was worried about her daughter potentially serving in Iraq during wartime. Around the same time, Isabella met the boy who became her fiancé—a relationship that Lisa was not happy about. After high school ended, after one particularly difficult argument, Isabella, age 18, stormed out of the apartment she shared with her mother, and moved in with her boyfriend and his parents.

The next two and a half years were tumultuous and difficult. Isabella attended one community college and didn’t like it, then attended a second community college and *“ended up failing out.”* Poignantly, Isabella describes finding herself at a pivotal point in her life: *“I sat there in his parents’ house about two months. And then I said, ‘I got to do something for myself. I can’t sit around here. I can’t be this kind of person.’”* She decided that she needed to find a college where she could get the help she needed. Researching online, she discovered Curry College’s PAL program. As she tells it, *“I applied. I put all my effort in. . . . Let me tell you, when I got that acceptance letter, I fell to the floor crying.”* Isabella is now finishing her junior year at Curry with a major in Early Childhood Education. For the first time in her life, she is getting good grades. She still has some roller-coaster days, but she is surviving.

Isabella's I-Poem

I'm not learning
I have a learning disability
I don't know
I was being tested
I remember being in a nice room
I was 6
I had AD/HD and critically dyslexic

I remember having the left and right on the desk
I remember a number line
I remember my teacher

I remember meeting my reading teacher
I had to go to Ms. P.
I remember the books
I remember the assignments
I remember the vowels
I remember how the letters work
I still use it
I shoot right through the Wilson Reading

I got pulled out of regular classes
I was brought to a different room
I loved it
I liked Mrs. C.
I loved being pulled out for Mrs. C.
I loved being pulled out for Mrs. P.
I hated being pulled out for Mrs. S.
I didn't like her
I didn't want to go to the room

I was critically dyslexic
I'd be lucky if I knew my ups from my downs
And my left from right
And if I graduated from high school from it

I remember my mom telling me
I sat in all my own IEP meetings
I've been in counseling since I was 5
When I was younger
I was like, "Oh, a place to go"
I used to go out in the doctor's office
I graduated with a 1.91 GPA
I made straight C's

I was a lazy student
 I could make fun of them
 I hated math
 I was in regular classrooms
 I would go to the resource room
 I had more access to things like computers that will read to you
 I had a teacher who would assist
 I was in Civil Air Patrol, for kids who want to be in the military
 I mean
 I was planning on going in the Air Force, but things change
 I met the guy
 I'll go with you
 I was 18

I was in Cape Cod Community College
 I was still planning on going to the military
 I just had to lose weight
 I want to be an MP
 I met him through Civil Air Patrol

I was, like, military, military, military
 I was, like, no, I'm still going to military
 I met my ex-fiancé and we ran off
 I sat there for a year, two years
 I couldn't afford anything
 I was begging
 I'll pay you
 I worked at J.P.
 I hated it
 I hated the way I was treated
 I was in Bunker Hill
 I tried to do my best
 I failed out
 I asked for a calculator
 I was really trying to pass that test
 I got like maybe a half a day

I ended up failing out
 I sat there
 I said, "I got to do something for myself"
 "I can't sit around here"
 "I can't be this kind of person"

I says, "What do I want to do?"
 I says, "What do I enjoy in life?"
 I said, "Well, you want to be a mother, right?"
 I said, "You got to go to college"
 I applied to tons of colleges and got rejected
 I said, "The heck with this"
 I gave up
 I've been applying for like half a year

I came on here
 I didn't like what it looked like
 I didn't think I was going to be happy here
 I applied
 I put all my effort in
 I got it
 I got that acceptance letter
 I fell to the floor crying
 I came here and everything was great

I think she was sad
 I told her off
 I wasn't, you know, very nice
 I was, like, "This place isn't for me"
 I was making an immature choice
 I hear from him every weekend, but he's, like, not an active . . .
 I was an infant
 I don't know
 I'm still her daughter

I've become more mature
 I mean I'm still immature...
 I was doing something with my life
 I'm scared of losing it
 I got approved for the Parent PLUS loan
 I was so excited
 I was so happy
 I mean nothing could have ruined how happy the day was
 I moved in
 I'm making B's
 I got asked out
 I know
 I don't know
 I saw her, Parents Day
 I'll see her for maybe a couple of weeks this Christmas

I don't have my ex-fiancé anymore
 I get to spend this winter with him [father]
 I just . . .
 I just called him
 I go, "Can I come see you?"
 I have my dad and my step-mom
 I know my other brother
 I know the older one
 I've met him once
 I've known her
 I mean, me and her talk on Facebook

I love her to death [PAL instructor]
 I love her
 I'm a part-time PAL
 I'm going back to full-time next year
 I can't live without . . .
 I'm getting Bs this semester
 I'm upset but my mom's very happy
 I got accepted to the honor society, she cried
 I just got offered to be on the Alexander Bell Honor Society
 I'm in the top 5% of the junior class

I came back to school and learned that I am an individual
 I'm learning
 I had the insight when I came back, about who I actually am
 I realized
 I have to learn to balance
 I had fun with my girlfriends

I realized that I need to do something with my life
 I was in Curry so that I could learn
 I don't get stuck on the Cape with my mom in the position of waitressing
 or working a job I hate
 not what I want
 I got...
 I was out on a side waiting
 I have to try really hard
 I have to do everything I can to be as good as possible
 I'm going to learn
 I have done this once
 I needed to do something with my life

I thought I wanted to be a cop
I take Criminal Justice
I thought I want to own my own business
I did that for about a half a semester
I thought maybe Nursing
I saw the organ in front of me and threw up
I thought Psychology
I never actually entered the Psych major
I changed
I want to change my major to Education
I'd have to go home
I've always liked little kids
I want to be a mother
I started off as licensure
I said to the lady
I thought I wanted to work with
I started
I went into a pre-school
I love it
I know what track I'm going into

I was never going to graduate high school
I was never going to go on to college
I wasn't going to succeed
I was just going to be a loser, basically

I don't want to be out there on the grass with the homeless
I exist
I'd also tell them that

I give my mom permission but she doesn't call M. [PAL instructor]
I'm first generation to go to college
I mean, talk to your kid
I show my family what I'm doing
But they have no idea what in heck I'm doing
I talk and they go, "Huh?"
I love M.
I think M. makes sure I stay with her

I like talking

Case #6: Shlomo

I met Shlomo for the first time three weeks before the end of the fall 2011 term—which turned out also to be three weeks before he would be completing his degree from Curry College. Like Bill, Shlomo decided to take a reduced course load, allowing him more time to focus on his course work. The slower pace, which he says “*helped tremendously*,” did require him to take one additional semester in order to complete the necessary credits to graduate. The day I completed his first interview was one week before the end of the term. I felt honored that he took the time out of his busy schedule to participate in this study.

When asked why he wanted to participate his first answer was that he was a psychology major and was interested in these kinds of studies. By his second interview, he confessed that he also participated because he wanted the opportunity to talk about his “*positive experience*” in college. As a student who struggles with a learning disability, he explained, “*It is really important to tell people that even though we struggle with school, we still can make it and get our college degree.*”

Shlomo was diagnosed with learning differences when he was in third grade. He describes the experience as being somewhat confusing:

The first memory I have is that I was just meeting—being brought out of the classroom setting and meeting my special ed instructor. I just wondered why. It was a very odd experience. I wondered, “Why am I being separated?” It’s a very odd feeling, I guess you could say.

Shlomo’s mother, Wendy, who is a social worker, recounts not noticing any learning difficulties until the first grade, when Shlomo started learning to read. He struggled academically over the

next few years. Because she had experience with students with learning disabilities, she decided to recommend that he be tested. The result was a dual diagnosis of dyslexia and AD/HD.

Shlomo shares several stories that expressed feelings of shame, confusion, and discomfort during his elementary and middle school years. He describes what it felt like to be removed from a regular classroom in elementary school and sent to a separate resource room for assistance:

When I was finally diagnosed with a learning disability, I was placed in a smaller classroom with a few other students, all of whom had the same difficulties. I remember feeling awfully confused and embarrassed that I was in this classroom. When my friends would ask me where I was going all the time, I found myself lying to them. I'd tell them that I was at the nurse's office because I was sick, or I got into trouble so I had to go to the principal's office.

Shlomo's situation became worse in middle school. He continued to get support in the resource room, both for reading and math, yet in this new school setting the students with behavior problems were all placed in the resource room, as well. As he describes it,

During my middle school years, it was a very difficult experience because a lot of—I was sort of clumped together with behavioral cases. It was one of those unfortunate circumstances. There would be a certain number of people who were smart and just had a very difficult time reading. And then there were others who were the behavior cases. It did affect a lot of people's ability to learn.

By the end of middle school, both Shlomo and his parents felt that something had to change, because he was developing a strong dislike of both school and learning. Wendy described this time as a turning point: *"It was such a source of frustration for him that we said, 'You know*

what? We have to do something differently. This is not—he's not going to get any place with this. '' Shlomo and his parents did some research and looked at high schools specifically designed for students with dyslexia. They found a school in Massachusetts that seemed like the right place, although Shlomo had to get used to the idea of living away from home. The process of identifying the school, finding the financial resources, and making the decision to move took some time, so Shlomo began there in his sophomore year of high school.

He flourished in the new environment. *"It was an eye-opening experience,"* he says, *"because I got to understand better my difficulties, I guess you could say. I met other students that had the same types of difficulties, and they came from different types of environments."* Shlomo and his mother both report that the most exciting change was that, in Shlomo's words, *"I had developed this whole, like, love for learning."*

The decision to send Shlomo to a private high school had family and financial repercussions. Shlomo comes from a small town about an hour north of New York City. His mother, Wendy, has a master's degree in Social Work; his father is an accountant. Shlomo has one sister, three years older, who is now in graduate school studying Occupational Therapy. When I visited their home in order to interview Wendy, I drove up to a white house on a hill about five miles outside of the town. Paint was peeling on the outside of the house, and the inside was lived-in and inviting. We sat in the living room, which had a comfortable couch, two large soft-looking chairs, and a coffee table that appeared to be made from worn wood.

When I asked Wendy to describe the relationship between her two kids, she answered circuitously, with words to the effect that they are "getting along much better now." I couldn't help but ask her to explain. *"That's an interesting topic, growing up with a sibling with learning disabilities,"* she began. *"My daughter is a bit of a princess, and she always wanted to go to*

private school. And I was like, 'No, Laura. There's no reason to go to private school; public high school is perfectly good.'" So, when Shlomo went to a private school for learning-disabled students,

What she said to herself is, "He's getting what I wanted." And no matter how much we talked with her, that, "Look Laura, this is truly a huge issue for him, and he's not going to be able to make it in life unless he gets the support and the foundation that he needs"—but she was very . . . It finally hit her, but—recently, I would say maybe her senior year in college and afterwards, she said, 'You know, Mom, I really see it now'—because now she maybe spent more time with him, he'd call her, and she saw how we struggled, that's why—that this was truly something that he needed, and it wasn't like her desire to go to private school and be artsy and do that whole kind of thing.

After high school, Shlomo decided that he wanted to live closer to home, so he went to a small college in Westchester, New York, for one year, then decided to take some time off because he wasn't sure of what he wanted to study. He says, *"I didn't really know what I wanted to do so I stepped back."* He then went to a community college for a semester, but didn't feel like that felt right. He took another semester to live at home and paint houses. The following year he decided to transfer to Curry College, primarily because he realized that he needed to be at an institution where his learning issues were understood.

Finances and indecision about what he wants to do are dominant themes in Shlomo's story. His mother expressed concern about his feelings of guilt surrounding finances. *"He didn't know what he wanted to do,"* she says. *"He's always been really concerned about the money aspect of school. I don't know if he has heard us talking, or because . . . Eagle Hill was very expensive, and some of the kids there were hugely rich."*

Shlomo did end up staying at Curry, deciding on a major in Psychology because, he says, it will keep many doors open. He tells me he plans to drive up in a few weeks to take that walk across the stage to get a well-earned college diploma.

Shlomo's I-Poem

I mean to say

I've been to two other colleges
 I went to Manhattanville
 I went through this time period
 I didn't really know what I wanted to do
 I stepped back
 I went to Community College
 I did that for a semester
 I still don't know what I want to do
 I took a semester off
 I transferred to Curry

I worked odd jobs here and there
 I just painted houses
 I took that time off in my life to figure everything out
 I don't know if it gave me much progress

I had a general idea
 I was a little hesitant
 I didn't know if it would be right for me
 I could help people
 I really like

I was in the third grade
 I was just meeting, being brought out of the classroom setting
 I just wondered why
 I wondered, "Why am I being separated?"
 I don't remember the exact words
 I remember being a little confused
 I don't really have memories of those types of conversations

I remember myself, like, my mom would set me down and we would read
 I'd read a page
 I'd lose interest
 I milked that

I started listening to texts on tape
 I developed a love of the story
 I could use my imagination at that point to just visualize what was happening
 [when] I'm just looking at the words
 I couldn't, like, visualize the scene
 I got to understand why everybody appreciated the story

I was sort of clumped together with behavioral cases
 I can understand the circumstances of coming from that difficult home life
 I think it was every day
 I think for reading and writing

I'll try to elaborate
 I transferred to my boarding school during my sophomore year
 I didn't know where my future prospects would lie
 I got to understand better my difficulty
 I guess you could say
 I'll just phrase it like that
 I guess you could say
 I met a girl from Kuwait
 I had developed this whole, like, love for learning
 I studied Zoology
 I studied Botany
 I studied Biology
 I love the Biology field
 I gained a love for Physics
 I thought that was really cool
 I could figure out...
 I play chess a lot, actually
 I like board games
 I like the whole strategy aspect and planning ahead
 I like it
 I play some Home Run Derby with my boys

I had this idea that I wanted to go to college because my parents have invested so much money into my education

I didn't really know what I wanted to do
 I was torn
 I felt like I was pressured
 I know it may sound like complaining

I think my father...
I think his father stressed math and sciences
I have an interest in science
I am fascinated about how the human body works
I'm more interested in Biology and Earth Science

I like the idea of being close to a city
I'm less focused on the city aspect
I learned that about myself
I love this campus
I'm like, "Wonderful"
I have learned from my—
I was thinking about maybe going to that field as well
I don't want to jump right into it

I remember sending off my SATs
I think the main thing going through my head was, "Is this test going to decide everything for me?"
I have accomplished so much since
If I did mess up, my life is over
I know it sounds a little drastic

I wanted to develop more independence from my parents at that point
I felt more of an independence
I was missing out on the family
I guess you could call them on the phone

I was getting more in touch with my friends
I had to leave school
I didn't really know any people
I met all these people
I started to develop a good group of friends my sophomore year
I hang out with my boys
As I said before
What I was saying
I hung out, played baseball, just hung out with friends

I knew there would be a lot more work compared to my high school
I didn't know what to expect
I guess you could say
I don't really know what I want to do yet
I can take some courses
I guess

I developed a very independent lifestyle ever since that point
 I mean
 I was younger, like 15

I finished that year
 I still don't know what I want to do
 I got on the phone with my parents
 "I really don't know what I want to do"
 I'm thinking about education
 I don't want to be forced into it
 I needed to work on some mechanics
 I can go to community college
 I need to work on some skills
 I did a drastic improvement
 I made more improvements
 I think there are these huge hurdles
 I didn't really have the best, I want to say, the best education
 I didn't really focus, more so on reading, when I was in middle school, that really hurt me
 I focused on books
 I only have the grammatical understanding of writing instruction
 I developed that
 I got an idea of how to work a paper
 I need to work on some mechanics once I graduated

I remember this one professor
 I remember coming in
 I've given the slip about how I had a learning disability
 I need extra time
 I showed up that day and he's like, "You never sent it to me
 I'm, like, "I sent it to you"
 I definitely handed it to him
 I think it was his fault, but –

I took a semester off at one point
 I read some books to improve my vocabulary
 I wanted to improve my writing all throughout
 I mean
 I maybe need it
 I want to work on that before I go to the graduate program
 I just want to be safe
 I've already been away from it for so long

I like the support
 I went to Curry because of PAL
 I got involved with some clubs
 I met some people
 I got to be exposed to some really interesting lectures
 I think
 I think what it comes down to is just finding a balance between work and play
 I think I got down this semester, but this semester has really been stressful

I know who I am as a person; it's just the career aspect I'm not sure of
 I sort of narrowed down the fields
 I don't know if it would be a job
 As I said
 I sort of like stepped back
 I approached each one
 I thought there were some career opportunities in that area
 I decided Psychology would be nice because I could work one-on-one with people
 I think it was just the idea, like, she was very proud of her son
 I think she approved
 I think that aspect, that idea of helping

I think there is a good deal of maturity that occurs, the college process
 I always thought of myself to be mature
 I had to be away
 I guess you could say
 I think
 I know who I am as a person but
 I can understand what I might want to do
 I don't know if it was a realistic expectation

I always notice for a while that I'd take longer when it comes to reading
 I usually get up and take breaks
 I usually walk around
 I can't just sit there and read for hours
 I kind of went back to my middle school days
 I usually pop in a text on tape and then listen
 I'm understanding the text visually and auditory
 I think it will be a transition that requires a lot of work

I remember
 As I said before
 I don't know how to answer that right now

I want to say
 I worked really hard on this English paper
 I worked hard
 I structured it perfectly
 I did all that work on my own
 I deserve that mark
 I was like, "Got it!"
 I deserve that
 I probably will

Conclusion

There are similarities and differences among the six students who participated in this series of case studies designed to answer the question: "How do students with language-based learning differences find their voice, within the context of family?" Demographically and educationally, there are similarities that are inherent to this study. All six students attend Curry College, in Milton, Massachusetts, and all six participate in the Program for the Advancement of Learning (PAL). All six have specific diagnoses of language-based learning disabilities. That is where the similarities end; the content and context of each student's story is clearly unique.

In a qualitative study such as this one, a detailed description of the setting of each story is necessary before one can identify and analyze themes, patterns, or issues (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994). In this chapter, using description and direct quotes, I have attempted to outline these six diverse living contexts. Each narrative covers how I met the student, how the student fits into his or her family, a description of the family, and a brief chronology of educational background and learning issues. Each case had its own dominant issues and patterns emerge, dependent on the particular family context. I continue the analysis of data in Chapter 5 by reporting thematic findings.

Chapter 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overview of Chapter

The purpose of this study was to investigate how college students who have a diagnosis of language-based learning differences find their own voice, particularly as viewed within the context of their relationship with family. As higher education administrators wrestle with how to support students with learning differences and their families, they naturally turn for guidance to the growing body of research regarding identity development during emerging adulthood and the particular needs of college students with learning disabilities. It is crucial that student voices be a part of that mix. This qualitative study was unique in that each of the six cases involved in-depth interviews both with a student and with that student's parent. Not only did each student's voice emerge, but also the interplay of the student and parent voices also created a distinct counterpoint, a weaving of melodies connecting student with immediate family context.

In this chapter, I describe the steps used in analysis of data, present the five key findings of the study, and conclude with a discussion reviewing themes resulting from both the construction and the sharing of the I-poems. The five primary findings emerged from the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews (six with Curry College students and six with their mothers), I-poems constructed from the six student interviews, a review of past educational testing, and final individual interviews with each of the six students.

It must be noted that all of the students chose their mother as the parent to be interviewed (and the one student with two mothers chose both of them). Although this is a small study, that is still a significant theme. In further discussion, I use the term *mother* instead of *parent* to

describe the parent interviewees, in order to accurately represent the voices in this particular project.

The structure of the in-depth interviews involved a focus on four critical time periods in the lives of the students and their families. Both students and mothers were asked to reflect on and describe the following periods:

1. When the student was first identified and diagnosed with learning differences
2. When the student decided to enroll in college
3. When the student made the transition to college
4. When the student selected a college major.

Steps in Data Analysis

Carol Gilligan's Voice Centered Relational Method provides the core structure of data analysis for this project. This approach consists of a series of sequential listenings, each having a different purpose in the analysis of interview data. Gilligan describes the complexity of the term *voice* when she writes, "Each person's voice is distinct—a footprint of the psyche, bearing the marks of the body, of that person's history, of culture in the form of language, and the myriad ways in which human society and history shape the voice and thus leave their imprints on the human soul" (Gilligan, 1993, pp. ix – x). The three steps of data analysis she describes are (1) listening for plot; (2) constructing "I-poems"; and (3) listening for contrapuntal voices.

Step 1: Listening for Plot

After reading and re-reading each student interview, supplementing this with the mother interview, reviewing each student's past documentation, and reviewing my research notes after each interview and visit (if appropriate), I wrote a portrait of each student. I made an attempt to describe both the student's story and the context of family in which that story takes place. These

portraits, found in Chapter 4, were an important first step in organizing the data and viewing each case, at this point in the analysis, as a large and whole picture, rather than separate fragmented pieces.

Step 2: I-Poems

The second step involved a concentrated focus on the voice of each student, with the purpose of listening for both the general flow and rhythm of the piece and for how the student spoke about himself or herself. Gilligan describes two rules important to use when constructing I-poems; I strictly followed both of them. First, I selected *every* first person “I” statement, along with verb and descriptors, with no deletions. Second, I maintained the original sequence as it appeared in the text. It was important to allow the student’s voice to guide a natural fall into stanzas, without interfering with the flow. The result was surprising in the clarity, intensity, and beauty of expression.

Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voices

This third step is where the strategies I used became similar to the more traditional methods of qualitative data analysis used by Myles and Huberman (1994), Creswell (2007, 2008, 2009), and Patton (2009). I carefully read the transcripts of all 12 in-depth interviews, and coded for themes using HyperRESEARCH software (and 49 distinct codes). I utilized the software’s report function to compare the themes of each student-mother pair, as well as to the themes apparent in the mother interviews as a whole to the themes that emerged from the student interviews. I wrote memoranda summarizing the students’ and mothers’ answers to each of the questions asked, and used those notes to create data charts for each of the four critical events that were the subjects of inquiry. (See Appendix.) Both the charts and the summary memos helped to guide my thinking as I selected the more robust findings of this study to discuss.

The major findings that emerged from this rigorous process reflected dominant themes represented in both student and mother voices and the interplay between them. Five major findings emerged from this study:

1. All student participants described the time when they were first diagnosed with learning differences as a time of confusion and/or shame.
2. Four of the six mothers described a time, between kindergarten and high school, when they were involved in a struggle with the school system regarding how to address the needs of their child.
3. All six participants described a shift, around the time of the student deciding to attend college, away from the primary parent relied upon during the earlier years and toward either the other parent or some other adult.
4. All six students articulated a pivotal moment, which occurred at some point during the college years, when they felt they had in some way discovered their true identity.
5. All six students described changes in relationships with parents, family, or home that resembled a spiral—moving closer, then farther away, then back again, all while they were growing developmentally.

The following discussion uses direct quotations from participants to support, identify, and articulate each of these five findings. The purpose of this section is to allow the voices of the participants to emerge and speak for themselves.

History and Early Diagnosis of Learning Differences

Finding 1: All student participants described the time when they were first diagnosed with learning differences as a time of confusion and/or shame.

Each interview—with both student and mother—began with questions that addressed the time when the student was first diagnosed with learning differences. It is striking that every student had some story or statement involving confusion or shame—particularly striking because these are students who are *making it* or *have made it* in a four-year liberal arts college in Massachusetts. All six of these students have either recently graduated from college or are heading toward graduation next year.

Despite the students' apparent success, the memories they described paint a picture of confusion. The students often used negative self-descriptors that indicated a feeling of shame.

The very first lines of Isabella's I-poem expressed this clearly:

*I'm not learning
I have a learning disability
I don't know
I was being tested
I remember being in a nice room
I was 6
I had AD/HD and critically dyslexic*

. . . .

*I got pulled out of regular classes
I was brought to a different room . . .*

*I was critically dyslexic
I'd be lucky if I knew my ups from downs
And my left from right
And if I graduated from high school from it*

Many of the participants' earliest school memories were of being told that they were not keeping up with the rest of the class. Katherine recalled one such moment:

The teachers talked to my mom. They said that I needed extra time. They realized in first grade that I was a little slow, but they didn't know why I was so slow—and then when my mom talked to me about staying back, I got really mad.

In very similar terms, Shlomo described the confusion he felt when he was pulled out of the classroom:

The first memory I have is that I was just meeting—being brought out of the classroom setting and meeting my special ed instructor. I just wondered why. It was a very odd experience. I wondered, “Why am I being separated?” It's a very odd feeling, I guess you could say.

The clear awareness of being different from peers was a theme expressed by many of the students. The feeling is captured by a poignant stanza of Sarah's I-poem:

*I have really smart friends
I wasn't
I didn't
I would just sit there*

Another student I interviewed, Bill, recalled the confusion he felt in elementary school when, assigned to a reading group, he knew he was different:

Um, I remember going to doctors, I didn't really understand. (Knowing what I know now, [as a] psychology major, I know what it is.) They took some tests, I didn't even realize they were tests at the time, I thought we were just playing. And, I don't know, they didn't really tell me much, because I was very young—I was 6 or 7 years old. So . . . I had trouble in school. I got a lot of, like—trouble, not serious trouble, but probably time-outs every day and, like, lunch detentions, because I was always running around and yelling out and annoying the girls and doing stuff I wasn't supposed to do in class, because I was hyperactive.

When asked about learning to read, he said,

It was slow. It took me a bit longer than most kids. I remember, probably first, second, maybe even up to third grade, during our reading time, during the school day, we would be split up into different groups and—I can't even remember what the names were, but they were different animals. I don't remember what they were, but there was one group that was obviously the slow one, and there was one that was obviously the advanced one, and I remember the slow one was dolphins. And I was in dolphins.

Sarah described having what appears to have been a long history of serious language delay, yet, curiously, her difficulties were not explained to her in a way she could understand until she came to college.

I was a very late reader. I was able to read in the third grade, but I still had a lot of difficulty? And . . . my first word wasn't until I was, like, maybe one and a half or two? Yeah, so, it took a really long time, and I still wasn't making complete words. I don't believe I was talking when I started pre-school.

They never really explained. I didn't know I had, like, I didn't know the name of what I had until I came to college.

Finding 2: Four of the six mothers described a time, between kindergarten and high school, when they were involved in a struggle with the school regarding how to address the needs of their child.

Four of the six mothers reported struggling with the school system in order to get the services they believed were necessary for their child. The two mothers who had to fight the hardest for services were both single moms (Ricky's mother was single until he was 8) whose children were enrolled in economically disadvantaged school systems. Isabella's mother, Lisa,

vividly recalled feeling shocked by the way it was presented to her that her daughter had learning disabilities:

And they all want her to stay back. So I turned around, and I said to them—of course, now I have my shield up here—“This is my kid.” The teacher says, “This child is a good child and she wants to learn, and I’m frustrated because I can’t teach her. She has a learning disability.”

Boom, just like that. I just looked at her, you know. So it was thrown right in my face like that.

I was shocked. And I just looked at her and I said, “What do you mean, a ‘learning disability’?” And she goes, “Wait, I can’t diagnose her, Lisa. The kid wants to learn, and I can’t teach her. That’s all I know.” So I says, “Okay.” So, now, I got a lot on my plate and I’m not quite sure what to do with it.

Lisa felt overwhelmed and alone until she started attending a local support group, where she met an advocate. Eventually she found support by working with a lawyer. She continued telling her story:

So I looked and I said, “Well, there’s supports for Alzheimer’s, AA, NA, . . . maybe learning disabilities?” And, sure enough, there was. There was a support group. And I went to it, and I sat in the back.

Yeah. I kept my mouth shut—and they were talking about my kid! And I knew. So, I, kind of, walked out in shock. And I says, “What am I going to do? Y’know? What am I going to do?”

So, I cried, and then I went back the second time—the second meeting, spoke to a lady, and I told her, I says, “I’m new—and you’re talking about my kid. Where do I go

from here? What do I do?” And then I met up—she introduced me to this lady, and she was an advocate.

Later, when she learned about a reading program she thought may be helpful because it was specifically designed for dyslexic children like her daughter, Lisa brought in a lawyer to push the school to hire a teacher who was qualified to use this method of instruction. When the school eventually did hire a teacher who used the reading program, Isabella’s reading level improved dramatically. Yet, this did not come about easily: Lisa had had to research the program, find legal support, and fight for it.

Like Lisa, Ricky’s mother also had to fight for a program that would fit her child’s needs. She reported having a rather shocking conversation with the principal of the kindergarten program in which Ricky was enrolled before he was moved, eventually, to a school for special needs children in kindergarten through second grade. Ricky’s mother described her experience through tears, in an increasingly shaky voice:

I had a problem with the principal. The principal kept calling me every day and tossing him out, tossing him out, and tossing him out. And finally I went there and said, “We can’t keep doing this. I have a job, I gave you everything [the testing], I don’t know what it is I’m supposed to do while I’m in my office and you have him. Something has to happen here.”

And she, the principal, actually said to me, she said, “You’re going to be lucky if he don’t end up in jail.”

So I said, “No, I disagree.” I said, “We’re going to fix it.”

And she said, “I’m telling you now: You’re going to be lucky if he doesn’t end up in jail. That’s going to be the best outcome. He’s not making it through school, and the only thing you can hope for is that he learns something, and doesn’t end up in prison.”

It was not only parents from school systems that were hurting economically who had to fight for services. Others—like Shlomo’s mother, from a wealthier suburban system—had to fight, too. Both Shlomo and his mother reported that, during middle school, he was placed in a full-day resource room for children with serious behavioral problems. Soon his parents saw that Shlomo—who was a very bright, dyslexic student with no history of behavioral or emotional problems—was beginning to hate school. It was heartbreaking for them. Although it posed a huge financial burden (the school system would not pay for the switch), they decided to withdraw him from the public system in ninth grade and send him to a high school for students with learning disabilities. The only school he could attend was not within commuting distance, so Shlomo became a boarder.

It quickly became clear that they had made the right decision. Shlomo began to love learning again. He described in his I-poem how he began to separate the frustration of decoding words into meaningful units (a common problem with dyslexic children) from the sheer enjoyment of the story:

I started listening to texts on tape
 I developed a love of the story
 I could use my imagination at that point to just visualize what was happening [when] I’m
 just looking at the words
 I couldn’t, like, visualize the scene
 I got to understand why everybody appreciated the story

Decision to Go to College and the Transition to College

Finding 3: All six participants described a shift, around the time of the student deciding to attend college, away from the primary parent relied upon during the earlier years and toward either the other parent or some other adult.

Although each of the six students were in very different situations, they each recounted a similar phenomenon that occurred during the time period when the decision to go to college took place: a shift in the person on whom they relied for primary support. For some, the shift was subtle; for others, it was quite stark. For some, it was a shift from one parent to another. For others, it was a shift from a parent to another adult who was not a family member.

Each student participant in this study was asked to recommend a family member to be interviewed. All of the students chose their mother—and in the one case where a student had two mothers, he chose both of them. Every mother interviewed for this project played a major role in the early years. Bill made the declaration, *“My mom was probably even more involved than I was.”* Katherine said, *“I only talked to my mom about it.”* Yet, around the time students were deciding about college and/or settling in to college, some sort of change occurred.

For four of the six participants, the change was between the mother and the other parent (the father in three cases, the other mother in one). Sarah relied on her mother during elementary and middle school; when asked about her dad, she responded, *“My dad just didn’t understand how to explain it (math) to me. I was also afraid of my dad for a while. I don’t know why.”* Then, in high school, her world began to change. She described, *“My mom was president of our temple, so my dad and I did a lot of bonding during that time.”* The shift occurred during college, when Sarah began to rely on her dad more than her mom. She found out, around this time, that her dad also had some learning challenges quite similar to her own, and that he also had struggled in

college. They began bonding in a new way. As she put it to me, *“Normally, with problems now, I call my dad just because I feel like he—or, at least, when I have difficulty understanding something, I will call him—because he understands it in a way, . . . because I don’t think my mom has an LD.”*

Similarly, during the college application process, Ricky shifted from relying entirely on his biological mother to relying on his other (non-biological) mother, because she had gone to college and was a good writing resource. He says,

My other mom was there, but, like, my biological mom was the one that I always talk to about, like, “Here’s the list of schools,” “I need to do that application.” My other mom was the main one to help with writing, yeah, like, “Is this okay?” She would sometimes ask her for her second opinion.

Bill was the student who said that his mother was more involved in his education than he was, yet he, too, described a shift to relying more on his dad. For him, the shift occurred as he was settling into college life. He told me, *“A lot of the decisions I make in life are based off of whether or not I think my dad is going to be okay with it . . . because, 99.9% of the time, my dad is right.”*

Katherine described her mother as the only one in the family she would talk to about her learning issues:

I only talked to my mom about it. Like, my siblings knew I had a learning disability, but my mom was the one that supported me through all of that. I mean, everyone did, like my dad and everyone else, but they didn’t know what it was, whereas my mom was the one that went through the testing and all that with me. So, when I ever had a problem with it

*or I needed someone to help me, she would help me, because she had the patience—
knowing I had disability.*

Yet, as high school drew toward a close and Katherine started considering possible colleges and jobs, her father began to play a much bigger role. Her dad, a physician, invited her to his office to work part-time. As a result of that experience, she decided that she wanted to become a radiologist. This led to a search for appropriate school programs and, eventually, the decision to postpone that dream for the moment. What stands out is that during this time, Katherine, like several of the other participants, shifted to the other parent, her father, for support.

The one student in this study who was a single child living with a single mom also made a significant shift at the end of high school. In the summer after graduating from high school, Isabella had a huge argument with her mother, as a result of which Isabella moved out of the apartment they shared. She moved in with her boyfriend's family, and she spent the next two years living either with them or in an apartment with her boyfriend. During this time, she and her boyfriend were both taking classes at a local community college, and Isabella relied primarily on him and his parents for support. She described the move, quite eloquently, in her I-poem:

*I think she was sad
I told her off
I wasn't, you know, very nice
I was, like, "This place isn't for me"
I was making an immature choice*

Two participants in this study attended boarding schools: Ricky went to a military high school, and Shlomo went to a high school designed for students with learning differences. The move away from home encouraged their reliance on other adults in addition to parents. As Shlomo recalled, *"I wanted to develop more independence from my parents at that point. And that's what I learned in boarding school. I felt more of an independence."*

During the College Years

Finding 4: All six students articulated a pivotal moment, which occurred at some point during the college years, when they felt they had in some way discovered their true identity.

All six student participants discussed in concrete terms the topic of discovering their separate identity: “finding themselves,” if you will. Each described a pivotal moment, one which I came to call an “‘aha!’ moment.” Given the negative emotions expressed during the early years of school when these students were first diagnosed, and their long histories of academic struggle, it is somewhat surprising that for these students, the “aha!” moments nonetheless occurred in the academic context, albeit at the higher education level. Even though school has not been a particularly positive place for these students, each of them experienced these pivotal moments in college.

The six students presented three different types of “aha!” moments. Two students experienced this pivotal moment in connection with academic accomplishments. Two others experienced it when it suddenly became clear to them why they should be going to college. The final two found it in the moment when they realized they had to handle the college experience on their own.

The two students who described “aha!” moments directly connected to academic achievements and fitting in academically have similar educational profiles. Shlomo and Sarah both fit the typical profile for bright dyslexic students. They have strengths in the Perceptual Reasoning indices of the WAIS (Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale), and weaker scores in the Verbal indices. Both were delayed in their language development, and both seem to know much more than they can express. Shlomo described his “aha!” moment in this way:

I think the first time I “got it,” I want to say, I was really stuck on this English paper for Writing Workshop. And then I worked hard, and I structured it perfectly. And I got it back—I think that was good work for me. And it was nice to say, “I did all that work on my own, and I deserve that mark.” So I was, like, “Got it!”

For a dyslexic student to be able to not only tackle a college paper on his own, but also feel he did it well, is a huge accomplishment. Remember, this is the student who in middle school was in full-day resource room with students exhibiting behavioral and emotional difficulties. His “aha!” moment came when, looking at himself, he was able to see his cognitive abilities, not just his deficits.

For Sarah, the pivotal moment occurred when a professor invited her to work in Curry’s Speaking Center, helping students work on oral presentations. This single request triggered a series of events, as she recollected:

It’s kind of funny, that—I feel like Professor K. and the Speaking Center has, like, really propelled me forward in my life at Curry. . . . I continued, and I got invited to the Honors Scholars program, and I was part of One Curry and the Peer Education group on campus And, honestly, I never thought I could be “that student.” I look back, and I’m, like, “How did I get here today?” I love it! And I love being involved.

This moment is particularly powerful because Sarah was the student who came from Hollywood, where she never felt that she fit in. She found her place in college, spurred on by her success in the school’s Speaking Center—which, in turn, triggered her decision to major in the field of Communication.

Both Katherine and Isabella had their own “aha!” moments. For them, it occurred when they realized what it was they wanted to do after college—or when they discovered why they

were in college in the first place. All at once, they both seemed to recognize who they were, or who they wanted to be. It is interesting to note that both of these students are Early Education majors. Katherine recalled:

Actually, it was in sophomore year or junior year, or maybe last year. I was talking to my roommate about classes and everything, and we started talking about the “real world” and, like, what we’re going to be in ten years.

I hear myself talk about it, and I was like, “Oh my God! I know what I want to do and who I want to be!” I was, like—this is the first time I felt that way, because I never thought about it. Do you know what I mean? I never thought about it when I was at high school, even when I just first came here. I never really thought about what it’s going to be like. And when I’m talking to her about it, it was like, “Oh my God!” And I realized I knew much more about what I wanted.

“Oh my God! I know who I am!”

And I went home to my mom to say it. She said, “Well, that’s good.”

Isabella described a similarly dramatic moment when she realized quite clearly why she decided to go to college:

One of the biggest realizations is when my ex-fiancé’s mother came into the bedroom, drunk, kicked his door open, threw stuff at me, and kicked the, whatchamacallit, air conditioner out of the window, because it’s highering her electric bill—and she couldn’t afford to pay her electric bill, because she couldn’t work, because she didn’t go to college. She didn’t have any skills or anything. And it was my realization, when I was out on a side, waiting for my ex-fiancé to get me, and then, that, that I have to

try really hard, I have to do everything I can, to be as good as possible, and be the best—because that’s how I’m going to stand out, and that’s how I’m going to learn.

I realized that I need to do something with my life, and the reason why I was in Curry is to learn, so that I don’t get stuck on the Cape with my mom in the position of waitressing or working a job that I hate, y’know, and being that low in life, and feeling that bad . . .

My mom says she’s very happy with the way everything turned out [with her life]. She likes it, and that’s what she wanted, and that’s what she went for. But that’s not what I want.

For Isabella, this was a moment of clear vision of who she is and the future she would like to create.

Ricky and Bill have both have long histories of struggling in school. Both of these students admit that they were not sure they could graduate high school, let alone make it to college. For both of them, the pivotal moments involved the realization that they need to rely more on themselves and their own decisions than on other people. Recalling his “aha!” moment, Bill described himself as actively participating in his own life:

I think over the last few years I’ve significantly reshaped who I am as a person. I think that’s in part due to college, in part due just to general things that have happened in my life and in my friends’ lives that, kind of, shaped a specific scenario for me to, kind of, stop focusing on what other people can do for me, and [start focusing on] how I can step up and do what needs to get done.

In similar fashion, Ricky found that he had to make some very difficult decisions when his grades fell so low as to place him on academic probation. This student, who came to Curry only because he wanted to play football, chose to drop football for one year in order to focus on his schoolwork:

It's just me, not playing football and focusing more on school, and seeing for myself that I can do it. I can do it by myself. There have been times that I told myself to go to the library and put those headphones on, and I just did tons of homework. I can do this.

Finding 5: All six students demonstrated a process of self-identification that involved moving away from, then closer to, then again away from their home base.

Finding #3 identified a shift in the person whom the student chose as a primary support during the time period between leaving high school and beginning college. When students reflected on where they were in the present, as juniors and seniors in college, it became clear that the first shift was simply one of many that continued to occur throughout the college years. The fifth finding from this study is that all six students described changes in family relationships that zigzagged, or perhaps spiraled, forming a constantly moving relational line. Sometimes, the movement was initiated by the student, who would pull away from, or reach toward, the parent. Other times, the movement was initiated by the parent, who would push the student to manage on his or her own, or would pull the student back toward the nest. Regardless of who began each particular movement, what is noteworthy is that the movement was not linear, and it was fluid.

The path that Shlomo described illustrates, in a literally physical way, this back-and-forth movement. Shlomo experienced mixed feelings when he left home at the beginning of tenth grade to attend a Massachusetts boarding school for students with learning differences. He loved the school, and he rediscovered his passion for academics—but he wasn't so sure about being

separated from family. *“There was this idea I was missing out on the family dinner,”* he told me. When choosing a college, he decided on a school fairly close to his home in New York’s Westchester County. His mother reported, *“Well, number one, I think it was the proximity to home. I think he wanted—at that point, he was done with Massachusetts. He wanted to be closer to home.”* After two semesters, he made the decision to leave school, come home, and go to the local community college. This was a surprise to his parents, who thought he was doing well because his grades were very good.

As Shlomo described his moving back and forth, away from home and back again, he attributed it to not knowing what he wanted to do:

I’ve been to two other colleges. I went to Manhattanville, in Westchester, New York, for a year, and then I went through this time period when I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. So I stepped back; I went to community college after that. After I went through the community college process, I was, like, “I still don’t know what I want to do.” So I took a semester off. And then that following year, I transferred to Curry.

Isabella’s zigzag, or spiral, was physical also. She moved out of her mother’s apartment after high school to move in with her boyfriend, yet her life changed again two years later. Isabella’s fiancé left her, so she moved back in with her mother during school vacations and summer breaks. First she told her mother off, then she returned to her mother’s home. As captured in her I-poem:

*I don’t know
I’m still her daughter
I’ve become more mature
I mean, I’m still immature . . .*

Sometimes it is not the student but the parent who initiates the separation. Ricky had a very difficult first year at Curry College, and was in danger of failing out of school. His

mothers, Maggie and Lisa, told him—to his surprise—that he would have to solve this problem on his own:

Maggie: Yeah, probably his first nose dive at Curry—because I was done. I was really, really done. And he knew it, because I was talking to him the way I’m talking to you. And I said, “Ricky, there’s nothing left.” I said, “I don’t know what else to tell you. I can’t do anything more.” I said, “So that’s it. I can help you, I can give you advice, you can call me. But I can’t do it. So it’s all on you.” And I think that’s where it changed. I think he was shocked.

[To Lisa:] *Do you remember that?*

Lisa: He was shocked. He expected us to pick up the phone and do something.

Maggie: Or to yell, and ground him, and punish him, and threaten him.

Lisa: And it didn’t happen.

Maggie: We just sat down and had a conversation about it.

It is noteworthy that Ricky, too, said his “aha!” moment was when he learned to manage college by himself. At the same time, he expressed some wistfulness regarding his relationship with his mothers, saying, *“I just think that I wish I had used my family more in the beginning. I’m close with them.”*

Katherine’s story illustrates that a student’s back-and-forth movement can be unpredictable, and may come as a surprise to student and family alike. Katherine’s mother reported that, unlike some of her other children, Katherine was not the kind of child who had difficulty separating from her mother. To the contrary, Katherine had strong social skills that helped her during transitions. Yet, when she left for college—moving only one town away—Katherine was hit with a virulent attack of homesickness. Here is how Katherine described it:

Well, moving in, my first week, I got really homesick—like, really homesick. And I remember coming to PAL and meeting Jean. And I was, like, holding back the tears. And she gave me a big hug, because she could tell something was wrong. And I just broke

down. And I said, “Oh, I don’t want to be here. I want to go home, just for a day. I just want to see my mom.” I was just really homesick. And my mom wanted me to stay down here. . . .

My mom ended up coming to pick me up that weekend—like, after the first weekend. I’m home for the weekend, I came back, and I was fine. It was just that one week, that I needed to know that they would . . .

She simply needed to know that her family would be there for her.

Bill and Sarah both talked about going home and coming back, and the benefit of that movement. Sarah, concise as always, said, “*That’s what I like about college—that I’m here, but then I’m there, too.*” Bill’s recollections of his back-and-forth movement were not as positive, but it is clear that the visits home were integral to his development of an independent identity, separate from friends and family:

I would go home, and everyone would be different. And, for the most part, it was all negative. I, kind of, went home and everyone seemed to find something negative to attach themselves to, be it drugs, or a dead-end job, or something like that, so I kind of—and it’s pretty significant junk—every semester, I come here and I come home, somebody has ruined another part of their life. So, while—my safety net is destroyed, so I’ve had to make my own.

I’ve had to burn bridges with a lot of people. One friend in particular that comes to mind, obviously I’m not going to name names, but—I had one friend who—he came from a really rough background. His dad was really abusive, and his mom never really did much about it. And now he’s pretty much turned into his dad. I burned that bridge of friendship when he became, really, a monster. He is not the person he was. Like I said,

people change, sometimes for the better, sometimes the worse. And that was definitely for the worse.

This spiraling movement—pulling closer to home, then pushing away from home, all while gradually growing in independence—seems to have characterized Bill’s development throughout his college years.

The Construction and Sharing of the I-Poems

The second step of the Voice Centered Relational Method (Gilligan et. al, 2003) was a focus on the “I” who was speaking by constructing a poem consisting of all statements beginning with “I,” collected in the order in which they were uttered. By constructing I-poems out of the first in-depth interview with each student, I was able to identify each student’s unique melody. The result was the student’s voice captured in a concentrated, distilled form, a voice more easily distinguishable because its purity.

Before the final step of synthesizing all data analysis and reflecting on the larger story of the developmental journey of college students with learning differences in relation to existing literature, I felt it was important to go back to each student and share each I-poem. I asked only one question: “Does this poem sound like you?” Reconnecting with each student, I was able to validate the findings-in-process. As I shared the poems, I watched the students’ face as they read. I could see the smiles, the laughter, sometimes the tears, as each student responded, “Yes, this is me.” The students, every one of them, thanked me, as if I had given them a very expensive gift—when all I had done was to shine a mirror to their words, and allow them to see their growth reflected back to them.

Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the five strongest findings that emerged from analysis of data collected from 18 interviews (12 in-depth interviews, one with each of six college students who have a diagnosis of learning differences, and one with each of their mothers; plus a shorter follow-up interview with each of the six students), analysis of the students' test histories, and a review of the research memoranda I had written after the four home visits and each of the interviews. The findings were organized chronologically, paralleling four critical events in the lives of students and their families: the student's first diagnosis of learning disabilities, the student's decision to enroll in college, the student's transition to college, and the student's process of choosing a college major.

The early years when the student was identified as having a learning disability appeared, universally, to be a troubling time for both student and family. The first finding of this study was that all six students recalled feelings of confusion or shame when they related the story of their diagnosis. The second, related, finding was that four of the six mothers reported having to stand up to the school in order to make sure their children were getting the services they felt were needed. It is important to examine those early years because the experiences from that time affect not only the future relationships between students and parents/guardians, but also the students' development of their self-identity as learners. The early years shape the developmental trajectory of students in relationship with family, life-long learning, and the growth of a core sense of identity.

The third finding was that, during the time period between making the decision to go to college and settling in to college, each of the six participants described some shift away from the primary parent relied upon during the earlier years. This begins the discussion of changing

relationships within the family and the phenomenon of students beginning to reach outside of the family for support as they develop into themselves. In addition to shifting the person to whom they reached out for support during this time of change, students also spoke of relying on non-academic interests or passions as a way to claim identity.

Another term for identity development is *finding voice*. A fourth key finding of this study is that the students clearly articulated a pivotal moment, which occurred at some point during the college years, when they felt they had discovered their purpose. These were the moments when students expressed a clear picture of who they were, what they were doing, and where they hoped to go.

The fifth finding is that each participant described changes in relationships with parents, home, and friends from home, that resembled a zigzag or spiraling movement – a process of pulling away from their sources of support, then moving back in, then pulling away again, all while growing in independent identity. This process appeared to be continuing as three of the six students graduated—and all three moved back home while they figured out their next step.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Overview of Chapter

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to investigate how college students with diagnosed language-based learning differences find internal voice , particularly as examined within the context of their relationship with family. The five key findings that emerged, described in the previous chapter, offer important implications for viewing the developmental trajectory of this particular group of college students. The intent of this chapter is to step back from the specific themes and codes to reflect on a larger story. This larger story is the development of internal identity, which I am calling *voice*, of emerging adults with diagnosed language-based learning differences.

One of the most important aspects of this study was that in-depth qualitative data was collected from both the students and a parent of their choice (which in all cases was the mother). The decision to ask both student and parent to tell their story was central because it acknowledges the importance of viewing students' development within the context of family. There is very little in the literature on college students with learning disabilities or emerging adulthood that allows the voices of students to be heard; rather, the bulk of the research is quantitative, relying on test scores and survey responses. Each of the six cases in this study involved a student who is growing into his or her own voice while maintaining a relationship with family. A major contribution of this study is the sharing of both the student and parent voices.

Implications and interpretations presented in this chapter derive from a synthesis of the study's findings, along with a second look at relevant and current literature. The four analytic

categories used to structure this discussion each involve areas where this study either supports or adds to current research. The four categories are as follows:

Early Context of Family (linked to Findings #1 and #2)

Findings 1 and 2:

Early diagnosis involved stories of shame and confusion from the student's point of view and stories of struggle against the school system from the parent's point of view.

Self-Authoring and the Context of Culture (linked to Findings #4 and #5)

Finding 4:

All six students articulated a pivotal moment, which occurred at some point during the college years, when they felt they had "found themselves."

Finding 5:

All six students demonstrated a process of self-identification that involved moving away from, then closer to, then again away from their home base.

Re-Centering Over and Over Again (linked to Findings #3 and #5)

Finding 3:

During the time period when making the decision to go to college, all six participants described making some shift away from the primary parent relied upon during earlier years, toward either the other parent or another adult.

Finding 5:

All six students demonstrated a process of self-identification that involved moving away from, then closer to, then again away from their home base.

The Power of Voice-Centered Analysis (linked to Findings #1 and #4)

Finding 1:

Early diagnosis involved stories of shame and confusion from the student's point of view.

Finding 4:

All six students articulated a pivotal moment, which occurred at some point during the college years, when they felt they had "found themselves."

The Early Context of Family

When discussing how college students with learning differences find internal voice, it is important to look at the profound impact of early school experiences on the students in this study. Lindeman (1926) wrote, "In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum" (p. 6). Although this statement was written many years

ago, the requirement to fit the student to the curriculum has not changed. All six student participants in this study could not adjust themselves to the established curriculum, and consequently they were separated from peers, tested, and eventually labeled as *learning-disabled*. The implications were that the student was broken, in need of being fixed, or a misfit in the established academic environment. Under the medical model of learning disabilities (discussed in Chapter 1), the academic environment is not questioned; it is the student who is examined, assessed, and labeled. This is a paradigm that focuses on the individual and excludes context. Results from this study highlight the pain this model can cause both students and parents.

The first two findings of this study—the shame and confusion all six students expressed, and the struggle with the school system that four of the six parents expressed—highlight the need for a more environmental and developmental perspective on students we call “learning-disabled.” The child and the academic environment together form a system, and it is that system that appears to be broken. Debra Waber, who is Senior Associate in Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Children’s Hospital Boston and Associate Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes it this way:

A learning problem is not a discrete entity that resides within the child, but a problem in the interaction between the child and the child’s world. . . . The learning disability diagnosis is best understood as a social construction that serves to correct for the inherent incompatibility between normally occurring biological heterogeneity and socially determined expectations. It is not a problem of disability but of adaption. (2010, p. 43)

In this study, the identity development of students was examined from the vantage point of the student's relationships with family. Dr. Waber suggests that there is also a need to examine the student within the context of the academic environment. She questions whether our narrow definition of what is "normal" is contributing to the high numbers of children who are diagnosed with learning differences. Her views contribute to a growing criticism of the medical model of learning disabilities, a model that can fuel a negative reaction from both students and parents.

Among the students in this study, Shlomo expressed the feeling of not fitting in and being confused, despite the fact that he was considered a very bright student. Shlomo's mother, Wendy, shared: *"You know, we, we really didn't have an inkling until he started school. Because he was always a very complacent kid, very attentive, his ADD really didn't kick in until he really had to focus on the classroom."* Sarah described not understanding how she "didn't fit in" until she came to a college where she worked with a learning disability specialist who could explain it to her. Although I have heard many of these stories from students over the years, what surprised me in this study was how well these six students covered up their reactions to those early experiences. It was not until they shared stories about early diagnosis that I could grasp the depth of the hurt.

This hurt not only affected the student; it had an impact on the parent, as well. Isabella's mother vividly described the meeting where she found out that her daughter had learning disabilities: *"Boom, just like that. . . . It was thrown right in my face like that. I was shocked."* Ricky's mother was also shocked and hurt when she was told that her son—though only in kindergarten—would probably end up in jail because of his learning differences.

These experiences form the backdrop and the context of the relationship between each student and parent in this study, a relationship that was forged, in part, during the early years

surrounding the diagnosis of a learning difference. Students relied on parents during early years in the school system because they needed an advocate and support from someone who recognized their abilities. Isabella would not have had the benefit of the Wilson Reading Program if her mother had not noticed and lobbied for her with the support of a professional advocate and a lawyer. Shlomo would have been left in an inappropriate educational setting that was causing him to dislike both school and learning, if his parents had not noticed and taken action.

The findings from this study shed light on a parent-child relationship that may have some different qualities than the relationship between academically successful students and parents. Wendy, Shlomo's mother described how close she felt she needed to be with her son in order to help nurture his success:

I really sat with him all through his whole—until he graduated high school. I sat with him every day to do homework with him. He could not do homework by himself at all, and I had two girls that were completely independent, that I did not have to help at all.

The intensity of these relationships extends into the later years of college and/or employment and has some impact on the developmental path of these students.

Self-Authoring and the Context of Culture

Self-authorship—the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2010)—can provide a useful lens for examining the changes that occur for students with learning differences when faced with the challenges of college. The four phases of development Baxter Magolda outlines—External Formulas, Crossroads, Becoming Author of One's Life, and Internal Foundations—describe an individual's transition from relying on outside authority to relying on an internal sense of self.

The students in this study appear to move between the first three phases of this self-authorship developmental map in a non-linear pattern. All of the participants identified a moment when they suddenly became aware of themselves, separate from external expectations. At the same time, each of the participants described moving back and forth between reliance on connections to family and reliance on self. This study describes a spiral movement as the emerging adult develops in relation to home or family, on the one hand, and the college environment, on the other. Sarah described this movement most clearly when she said, *“That’s what I like about college—that I’m here, but then I’m there, too.”* Both Ricky and Bill discussed going back and forth between home and school. They told of their awareness that compared to friends living at home, they could see changes in themselves. These findings suggest that it is the ability to “spiral”—to move away, turn back, and move away again—that supports the complex development of internal voice in students with learning differences.

One criticism of Baxter Magolda’s work is that only three of the original participants in her seminal 2001 longitudinal study were from underrepresented groups. This opens the door to unanswered questions about diverse populations, which need to be asked because “practitioners sometimes assume that the extant research is applicable to all students” (Torres, 2006, p. 65). Findings from this study suggest that the development of identity in students with identified learning differences is similar to that of students who do not fit the traditional, white, middle-class image of the college student.

An example is the work of Torres and Hernandez (2007). These two researchers found that the self-authorship developmental journey does not necessarily capture how Latino and Latina college students progress and grow, because Latino/Latina students turned for guidance to family members and well-known peers rather than traditional authority figures. There is a

growing body of literature that acknowledges the cultural socialization process that Latino and Latina students experience when entering higher education (Torres, 2004; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006). Because of the emphasis on family connections found in both populations, I believe this research is applicable to the growing population of students coming into higher education with learning differences.

Marin (1993) defines *familialism* as “that cultural value which includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family” (p. 184). Students with diagnosed learning differences, especially when diagnosed at an early age, rely on family to advocate for them and believe in them as they progress through their schooling. This may explain why students with learning differences tend to turn toward family members before turning to more traditional authority figures such as professors, advisors, or counselors. In fact, for these six participants, it appears to mark a developmental step forward when they transition from contacting parents when encountering difficulties, to contacting a professor, advisor, or counselor from the college. Baxter Magolda’s model does not distinguish levels of external authority figures. The two populations of Latino/Latina students and students with learning differences do have some similarities, and neither of these unique populations are represented in Baxter Magolda’s model of development.

Self-authorship has been conceptualized as a construct with three dimensions: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal (Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010). Preliminary work is being done to create a quantitative measure of self-authorship, and different researchers have taken different positions on the role of these three dimensions. Some have provided evidence that the three dimensions are equally strong (Baxter Magolda, 2010), some argue that the cognitive

dimension may dominate (King, 2010), and one researcher studying a sample of Asian American students concluded that, there, the interpersonal dimension was overriding (Pizzolato, 2010). I believe that more research needs to be done with the population of college students with diagnosed learning differences. Preliminary findings from this study suggest it is the dimension of the intrapersonal (“Who am I?”) that is the dominant developmental task for students with learning differences.

Re-Centering Over and Over Again

Jennifer Tanner (2006, 2010) describes one of the critical developmental tasks for emerging adults, whether in post-secondary education or in the work force, as the process of recentering. “Recentering constitutes a shift in power, agency, responsibility, and dependence, between emerging adults and their social contexts—primarily experienced by emerging adults as a period during which parent regulation is replaced with self-regulation” (Tanner, 2006, p. 27). Although there is acknowledgement in the literature that this process resembles (but also differs from) separation-individuation, there is very little research focusing on the key difference: Recentering is a process that is relational. The current study helps to address that gap in the research by investigating the relationship between student and family, as the student is involved in the world of college. This investigation provides some new understanding of how changes in that important relationship inform the developmental task of finding voice and developing confidence in and responsibility for that voice.

The three stages of Tanner’s recentering model are: *Launching*, where the individual and the parents are together within the family system; *Emerging Adulthood* proper, where the individual is tied both to identities and roles of childhood and simultaneously to new identities and roles; and *Young Adulthood*, where the individual has established identity and role

commitments that allow for separation from family-of-origin. The emerging adult moves from being embedded in the family-of-origin system into a new family system of his or her creation.

The participants in this study seemed to be in the second stage of Tanner's model, yet they may slip back into the first. Sarah, for example, reflects on how she likes being able to go back and forth between home and school: *"That's what I like about college—that I'm here, but then I'm there, too."* While expressing clear connection with their family of origin, these students are trying out new roles living away from home and investigating paths of study that could lead to jobs in a variety of fields. This research project reflects only a slice of time; it certainly would be interesting to follow these six families over the next decade in order to observe the recentering trajectory. Based on the finding that students spiral back and forth while they are in the process of developing voice, and based on the observation that all of these students remain firmly planted in their families of origin (despite learning a tremendous amount about who they are as individuals), I wonder whether the connection to family will ever undergo a complete separation.

Will this population of students, who are separated from peers in elementary school, and who form close family connections needed for survival, develop a similar trajectory as students who do not have this history? Is the give-and-take between the individual and the parent perhaps more important for this group as development occurs? I agree with Jennifer Tanner that the recentering process is relational, but I believe more research is required to focus on how changes in relationship affect the path from adolescence, through emerging adulthood, to young adulthood, especially for distinct sub-groups within the general population.

Tinto (1993) suggested that students must separate themselves from their former communities, including families, in order to fully integrate into and be successful in higher

education. However, more recent research has shown that minority students' support networks may lie outside of higher education (Palmer, Davis, & Maranba, 2011). In a recent qualitative study conducted at the State University of New York-Binghamton, 11 Black male students were interviewed. These students, who entered a public historically Black college and university as under-prepared, each persisted to graduation. The study's findings affirm the impact of family support on the success of these 11 men. Findings also affirm the justification to revise Tinto's theory of separation from family, to include relationships minority students have with family support networks outside of the campus (Palmer, Davis, & Maranba, 2011).

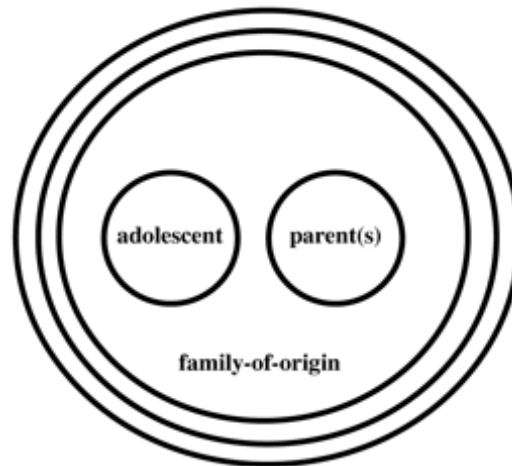
One of the most striking findings of Arnett's original research (2000) was the answer individuals between 18 and 26 gave when asked to identify the top criteria for adulthood. The first two answers were: (1) Accept responsibility for yourself, and (2) Make independent decisions. I suggest that students with learning differences face unique developmental challenges when growing into independence and responsibility, and that these unique challenges may prolong key relationships with family members. As measures of growth, the two criteria of adulthood identified in Arnett's study are gradual and abstract, rather than abrupt and concrete. The developmental process can be long and rocky, especially for students who have been protected by parents who were trying to provide for their children's specialized needs.

Although the goals and the outcomes of the crucial developmental task of recentering may be identical between Tanner's population and the group in this study, results from this investigation suggest two major differences. First, the starting place in Stage 1 looks different for students in this study. The students in this study, who were diagnosed with language-based learning challenges at an early age, seemed to require an interdependent relationship with family during the early school years. Tanner's Stage 1, for this group of students, should be split into

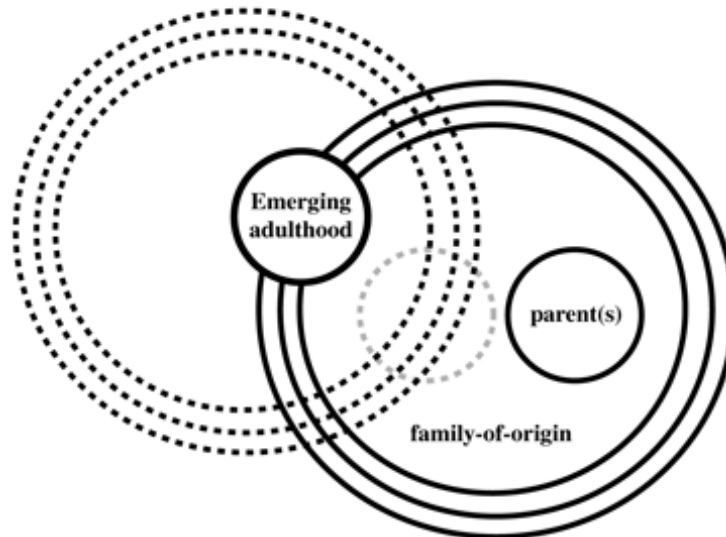
two separate stages that I will call Stage1A and Stage 1B. Second, the movement between all stages is not linear; it is a spiral movement that goes back and forth between stages, as the student recenters over and over again, as illustrated by these diagrams:

Tanner's Recentering Model

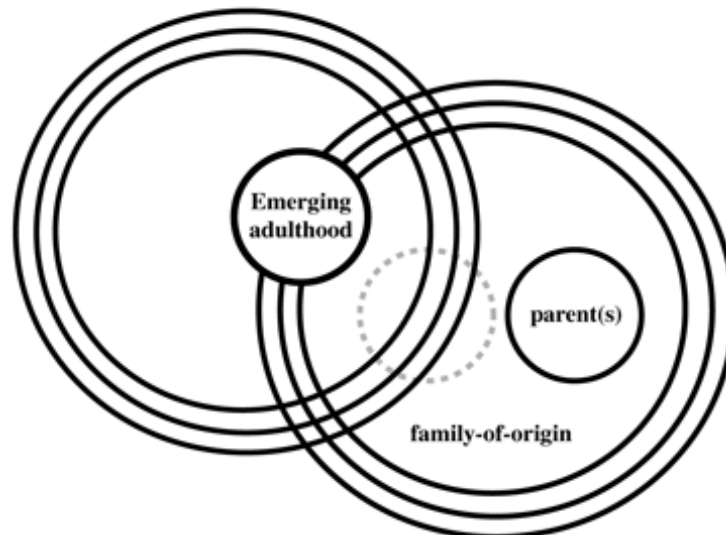
Stage One



Stage Two

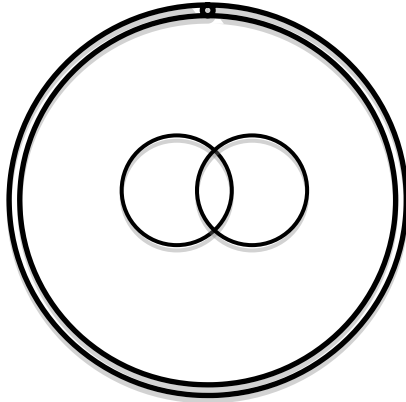


Stage Three

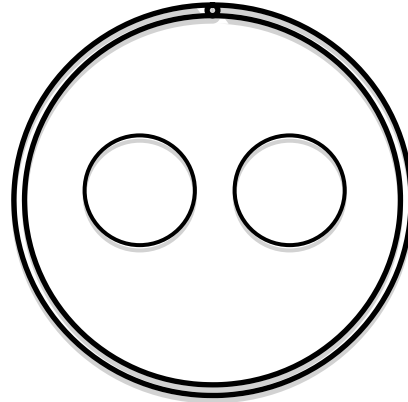


Tanner's Recentering Model
Adapted for College Students with Learning Differences

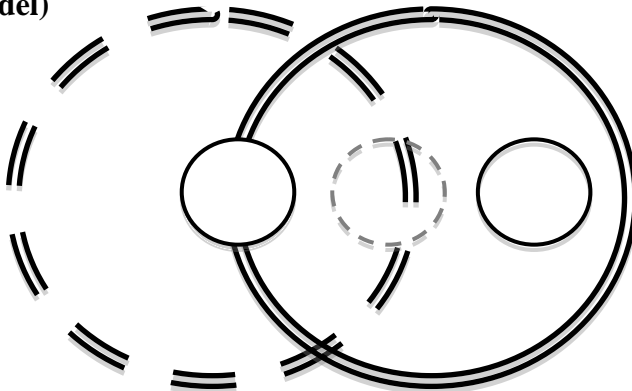
Stage 1A: Student and parent are overlapping within the family circle.



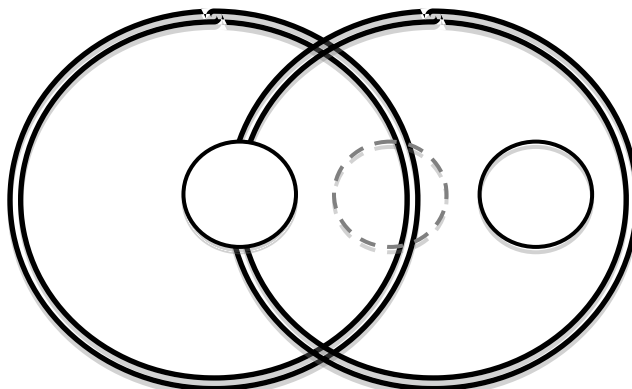
Stage 1B: Student and parent have separated within the family circle.



Stage 2: This stage involve mini-storms and mini-recenterings, as the student investigates temporary identities and roles of adulthood. (Same as in Tanner's model)



Stage 3: The emerging adult begins to decide on identity and role commitments. (Same as in Tanner's model)



In Tanner's model of recentering, the adolescent and the parents start out as separate entities within the same family. Results from this study, too, show that the student and at least one parent start out in very close proximity—perhaps even overlapping—as a result of the struggle with the daily school experience in the early years. However, students with language-based learning differences, whose diagnosis usually occurs during first-second grade when they are learning to read, have an additional developmental step to take when they become emerging adults. The parents of these students, because of the role they have had to play, also have additional tasks during the start of the recentering process. The additional developmental tasks involves some separation between parent and student, as shown in Stage 1A and Stage 1B.

My image of recentering is that of a huge swirl of hurricane wind descending upon the student. The wind is driven by clamorous voices of expectations and external pressures, and yet it gives way to a calming breeze and a slight shift in perspective. Students with learning differences must go through these shifts again and again. Parents of these students also must go through these shifts, again and again, in order to get to what I identify as Stage 1B. Parent and student are separate, yet are within the same family constellation. This is an additional step that both student and parent must take as the student begins to investigate the voice withi—the voice that will lead to selection of a college major, a vision of life out of college, and a sense of independent self.

Voice-Centered Analysis

The Voice-Centered Method of data analysis became more than a process of analysis, it became an integral and powerful part of this study. By focusing on the individual voice of each student, I was able to separate the voices of the student from the family. By doing this, I could see strategies each student used to find internal identity.

For example, all six students noted the importance of some non-academic interest, or passion, that they described as helping them during the time period of the middle to the end of high school. Sarah became a black belt in karate and said, of the karate studio, *“In high school, it was like my safe place, really. I went there three or four times a week.”* Ricky developed such a passion for football that when he first came to Curry College, playing football was his only motivation. Bill was a singer in a high school band, and some of his first friends at Curry College were musicians like himself.

Katherine’s faith in God and her pleasure in playing piano both created her safety net, in addition to the support of her large family. Isabella’s interest in the military and her involvement with the Civil Air Patrol in high school, where she met her boyfriend, seemed to support her through high school and during her community college experience, although these supports evaporated by the end of her first year at Curry. Shlomo shared this: *“I play chess a lot. Actually, I like the whole strategy aspect and planning ahead.”*

It is not unusual for students who experience language difficulties to have strengths in the areas of abstract reasoning, problem-solving, art, music, or dance. These strong interests outside of academics, particularly at the transition stage between high school and after-high school, may have helped these students remain in touch with their strengths and talents.

The second, and perhaps most important, way the voice-centered method became an integral part of this study was by using the I-poems in the final interview with each student. After compiling and reading the I-poems, I decided to share them with each student as a way to help them see their own reflections in the words they had uttered. The results of these final meetings with students were unexpected and powerful; in fact, the analysis became an intervention I had not planned on.

When presenting the poems, my only question to each student was, “Does this sound like you?” Over and over, the answer was, “Yes, that’s me.” Ricky said, “*Yeah, that’s me. But it’s not over yet.*” Sarah cried one moment, laughed the next, then said, “*Yes, this is me. Can I have this?*” I gave all of the students a copy of their I-poems, and each one thanked me for the gift. In fact, the gift I gave each student consisted of simply the words they had given to me. Other than extracting their “I” statements from their interviews, I had changed nothing. Yet, somehow, in the process of studying *voice*, I seem to have become involved in supporting *voice* as well—an outcome that came as a welcome surprise.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the complex and multilayered process that surrounds college students who have been diagnosed with language-based learning differences are involved in as they find internal voice within the context of family. Findings from this study contribute to a growing body of literature that include the voices of students who have learning challenges, as well as a focus on the context in which we hear those voices.

Connections were made between the findings and current literature exploring the developmental trajectory of emerging adults as they create a life separate from, yet connected to, family. Questions were raised about Baxter Magolda’s model of Self-Authorship regarding the application of the model to underrepresented minorities or marginalized populations. Questions were also raised regarding the application of Tanner’s three-stage model of Recentering to this population of college students who have a history of learning challenges and differences. The suggestion was made to perhaps split the first stage into two mini-stages (stages 1A and 1B) when applying the model to this particular population of emerging adults.

Presenting the implications of these findings requires some caution. A substantial amount of data was collected from a total of 18 interviews, a thorough review of past psycho-educational assessments for each of the six students, a visit to four family homes, and many pages of research memoranda. Still, this was an exploration of only six cases. The fact that this was a small sample should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings and drawing implications from them. Moreover, the students in this study chose to be a part of it; they could possibly represent students who felt some particular need or desire to tell their story. The students in this study, although from quite varied ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds and settings, were also quite similar to each other in that they were all drawn to studying at the same college and participating in the same support program. The parents in this study were also active participants in their students' family life, and one must acknowledge the many different parenting styles. For these reasons, I recommend caution when applying these findings and interpretations more generally.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of Chapter

A recurring theme in both adult learning literature and emerging adulthood research is the tension between individual/psychological and group/sociological perspectives. The purpose of this study was to ask how college students with learning differences find internal voice (individual), as viewed within the context of their relationship with family (social). The findings of this study add to a growing body of development literature that incorporates an equal emphasis on both psychological and sociological perspectives (Taylor, 2008; Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2006, 2010; Arnett, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Only with a dual focus can we create a “comprehensive integrative map” of development (Taylor, 2008, p. 217).

This study utilized the method of case study to explore how six students, situated within six diverse family systems, described their experiences as college students with learning differences. Case study is a preferred method of social science research when (a) “how” or “why” questions are being posed, (b) the focus is on a contemporary real-life context, and (c) the investigator has little control over events (Yin, 2009). The question being investigated was how college students with learning differences find internal voice with particular emphasis on the context of family. In-depth interviews were conducted with each student and a parent volunteered by the student (all mothers) and follow-up interviews were held with each student, for a total of 18 interviews. A thorough review of past educational assessments and reports was conducted as well as family visits in four of the six cases. The students all attended the same college and the same support program for students with learning differences.

This chapter presents the three major conclusions suggested by the study's findings (outlined in chapter 5) and interpretations (discussed in chapter 6). Recommendations are made for programs that address the needs of college students who have diagnosed learning differences, for higher education administrators and student life personnel, and for parents and students with learning differences in the environment of higher education. Discussion will continue with recommendations for further research, and the chapter will culminate with final reflections.

Three Major Conclusions:

#1: The medical model of learning differences provokes feelings of shame on the part of some student, and often engenders antagonism between parent and school system. This has an impact on relationships between parents and children that continues into the emerging adulthood years.

#2: Relationships with family undergo changes during the college years, yet family remains important to these students with learning differences. The developmental map representing students finding voice is shaped like a spiral; it is a continual movement that circles back on itself, even as it simultaneously grows upward.

#3: Voice-centered relational research provides a useful lens for viewing the intrapersonal development of college students with diagnosed learning differences. Findings suggest that the students' development of *voice* represents a core shift in identity.

Has the Medical Model Outgrown its Utility?

Phillip Schultz won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2008 for his book of poems poignantly titled, *Failure*. In 2011, he published a memoir, *My Dyslexia*, in which he writes that at the age of 52, "I am finally beginning to struggle with those old self-images of myself as someone who didn't belong among the honored. Perhaps I was someone whom others could

admire, someone more than a permanent member of the Dummy class?” (p. 23). His words are strikingly similar to those spoken by the student participants in this study. The first two findings of this study were that each student confessed to feelings of confusion and shame when telling the story of early diagnosis, and that four of the six mothers shared painful stories of struggling with the school system on behalf of their children. It appears that a system based on a medical model that focuses on pathology, created to identify and support children who learn differently, has unintentionally become a source of pain. This leads to a rather difficult question: Has the medical model of learning differences outgrown its utility?

The term “learning disability” was first used in 1963 by educator Samuel Kirk, when he was at a conference in Chicago, Illinois, with a group of parents whose children at that time were referred to as having “perceptual handicaps.” His use of the new term was intended to shed light on the neurological basis of a “disability” that affected children with average to above-average intelligence. The term “learning disability” was to encourage advocacy and policy changes at a time of a growing civil rights movement, coincident with the U.S.S.R.’s recent launch of the Sputnik satellite, which was provoking growing pressure to raise the standards of education in the United States. Six years after the term was first used, the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969 was enacted, providing federal funds for education and research. The original use of the term “learning disability” was clearly a positive move forward.

Since then, however, the marriage of legislation-creation with a diagnostic medical model of learning disabilities has proved somewhat convoluted. A model that requires proof of students’ deficiencies in order to get them the help that they need has had the effect of fueling parents’ concerns about their children’s low academic skill levels and weak self-esteem, while sending the students themselves a clear message that they are broken or sick. Results from this

study demonstrate that a well-intended construct has led to unintended consequences, and is now contributing to a damaging experience for students and parents alike. I was surprised to see how deeply hidden the stories of shame were for each of the six participants in this study. We, practitioners providing support services, need to be cognizant of the painful experiences students with learning differences are bringing with them to the college or university environment.

Results from the first two findings also lead to a second conclusion: that the experiences that young children go through with family, parents, or guardians, when they are diagnosed with a learning disability, forge a relationship between parent and student that continues into the emerging adulthood years. The mothers told stories of protecting and standing up for their children. Both Ricky's mother and Isabella's mother paid for independent evaluations, so that they could be sure that the testing was complete and thorough. Bill's mother talked about how many hours she sat with him, helping him get through homework each night of high school. At the same time she shared a keen sense of his particular strengths. Katherine's mother talked about how proud she was of her daughter when she got on the school bus for the first time and didn't seem to have the separation anxiety some of her siblings had.

When students do leave home and go to college, we cannot expect a simple switch to flick and change an interdependence that was necessary for years. The six students in this study have language-based learning difficulties that are usually diagnosed around the time that students begin learning to read. Each student in this study experienced difficulties in school between the years of kindergarten and third grade, and within those years each of the students went through hours of testing and a diagnosis of disability. The parents had to face that diagnosis and, for the rest of the students' elementary and high school years, help advocate for the services that they

felt were needed. A particular relationship between parent and child developed over these years, and that relationship continues into the years of emerging voice and emerging responsibility.

Development Resembles a Spiral

For students generally, their relationships with family undergo changes during the college years, yet family can remain hugely important to the student with a history of learning differences. The students in this study all went through particular experiences that affected their sense of self and their need for support during early school years. Even when they enter college, student with that history continue to have challenges unique to their experience. The role that family plays in the students' development during the college years needs to be addressed with that in mind.

Literature on ethnic identity development and familial influences on identity development provide a rich source of research applicable to the study of students who have diagnosed learning challenges. Although the specific challenges in each population may be different, the situation resonates with a similarity involving the central influence of relationships with family. Development involves intricate connections between cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal growth, and a study of marginalized populations may offer new ways to view this interconnectivity (Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres and Baxter Magolda, 2004).

The findings suggest that for these students with learning differences, family remains important, yet the students seem to move alternately away from and toward family as a part of the development of self. As seen in the six cases in this study, the pattern of developmental growth resembles a spiral: It is a continuing movement that circles back on itself even as it grows

upward. The student is slowly moving into a more separate identity while staying connected with family.

Katherine's bout of homesickness during the first week of school illustrates the spiral; she just needed to visit once to make sure they (her family of 13) were still there for her, and then she was able to move on. The spiral movement appears to be actuated by parents as well as by students. Ricky's mother, when her son got into trouble during his first semester in college, had to move away from him. In a straightforward, unemotional conversation, she told him that she "was done" and he was on his own. The nature of a spiral is to move out and then move back in, yet each time the movement is repeated the original position is slightly changed. Perhaps a moment of recentering occurs each time the spiral comes home, and in this way the internal sense of home slowly moves into the core of each student.

If a student does not have a parent who is involved, the student's path may be more difficult. Such a student, on arriving at college, might benefit from more intensive, personalized support to cope with the transition. One student in this study, who was a single child living with a single mother made the decision to reach out to adults other than her mother to support her during her post-high school years.

Developing Voice Represents a Shift in Core Identity

Voice-centered relational research provided a surprisingly useful lens for viewing intrapersonal development of college students with diagnosed learning differences. This approach "is a method of psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche" (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003).

Constructing I-poems out of the in-depth interviews allowed the voice of each student to become

condensed and thereby strengthened. In particular, rereading I-poems shed a brighter light on the “aha!” moments of self-discovery each of the six students articulated.

Although each student described a pivotal moment that highlighted core identity development, these moments occurred in three different types of situations. Two students experienced this pivotal moment in relation to particular academic accomplishments; two students related it to a moment of epiphany when suddenly they knew who they were and who they wanted to be; and the final two found it in the quiet moment when they realized they needed to rely less on others and more on themselves.

Each of these moments represented an intrapersonal step forward in development that occurred not between the student and family members or the student and peers, but between each of the students and themselves. Findings suggest that developing internal voice represents a central shift in identity and that, at the same time, it is an essential part of the spiral moving away from family and into a solid core sense of self. This movement is accomplished within a connection to family, but it is not a result of that relationship. A poignant example of this is Katherine’s moment. After she articulates her epiphany—“*Oh my God! I know who I am!*”—she then feels the need to go home and share the declaration with her parent. “*And I went home to my mom to say it. She said, ‘Well, that’s good.’*”

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions from this study lead to practical recommendations for programs in higher education that are designed to support students with learning differences, for higher education administrators and student life professionals, for parents, and for students. Recommendations for further study are also discussed.

Recommendations for College Support Programs:

Recommendation #1: It is important to be aware of the unique relationships with family members that students may be bringing into the college environment. Our role should include educating parents about the many differences between parenting high school and college students. For example, a direct discussion should occur about the differences both in the laws protecting the privacy of information about students with learning differences and in the academic expectations for their sons and daughters.

Recommendation #2: Encourage students to meet with professors and/or tutors out of class, and, by creating structured mentoring sessions, help the students learn to avail themselves of these opportunities. Support from an outsider (someone outside of the family) may be an important developmental step in building the students' confidence in their independent voice.

Recommendations for College Programming:

Recommendation #3: Administrators in higher education are beginning to acknowledge the important role that parents play, instead of simply telling them to go away. Support programs have been created to educate parents about appropriate parenting of college students. This important work needs to continue. A central office where parents can get their general questions answered is crucial in the college/university environment.

Recommendation #4: College administrators, faculty, student life personnel, and security personnel need to be educated about the variety of learning differences students may have and how that may present itself in the classroom, in the residence halls, and at social venues.

Recommendation #5: Students' individual strengths need to be recognized, acknowledged, and incorporated into the learning environment in order to help students honestly look at who they are and what they can give to the world. The moments when students recognize

their strengths are an important part of development; we can't let those moments simply melt away. I recommend abandoning the deficit model and developing a strength-based model.

Recommendations for Parents:

Recommendation #6: Colleges and universities need to support parents in learning how to support their students from the passenger seat rather than the driver's seat. Colleges should be running workshops, not just at summer orientation but also at different touchpoints during the four years of college, that address how to support students in developing self-reliance and sense of voice. Parents of students with learning differences need to be reassured that they still have an important role, even though that role is quite different than it was in high school. It could be helpful to include in multiple workshops the following topics:

- The differences in the laws that protect students in secondary and post-secondary school.
- The developmental trajectory of the spiral, including how parents can appropriately support the growing self-determination and sense of responsibility of students.
- The responsibilities of students, parents, and professors at the college level.
- The three steps of self-advocacy: self-awareness, self-expression, and appropriate presentation to faculty or college professionals.
- A thorough discussion of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Recommendations for Students:

Recommendation #7: It would be helpful to create parallel workshops for students that cover a range of similar topics, including:

- How to deal with parents' anxieties.
- FERPA: Whether students should sign the form that permits their parents to access the student's college portal
- The shift from high school to college: Differences in the law, new cognitive expectations, social pressures, health choices, and how to deal responsibly and appropriately with self-advocacy.

Recommendations for Further Research:

I recommend three areas of further research based on limitations of this study. First, the participants of this study, although from quite diverse backgrounds, all attended the same college. More research employing this same case study approach needs to occur with participants in different settings: colleges and universities of different sizes, in different areas of the country, in different countries outside of the U.S. In addition, many students with a history of learning differences do not go to college; the developmental trajectories in the work world need to be explored.

The two common characteristics in this research would be a research sample of students with a diagnosis of learning differences and an exploration of the development of their sense of self that includes relationships with parents/family. Comparisons between these different populations can extend what we know about the impact of familial context on development of internal voice. This research can also help to extend and refine the recentering and the self-authoring models of development.

The second area of research is comparison studies between students with different learning profiles. This study focused on students who have language-based learning challenges and their relationships with family as they learn about themselves and find their own path. Would the relationship between student and family be different with a group of participants who have the diagnosis of a non-verbal learning disability? These students may have superior language and long-term memory skills, and at the same time have severe challenges with math, visual-spatial abilities, and/or social skills.

Torres (2004), when writing about programs designed for the Latino/Latina populations, notes that “[a]lthough not all Latino/Latina students are the same, programs often are set up as if

they were all the same” (p. 467). So it is with learning differences. We have a tendency to lump together all students who have learning challenges, which is not helpful for practitioners and not effective for researchers. More research is needed with students who present with different learning profiles, especially with respect to the impact of family on intrapersonal development.

Third, I suggest a need for more research in the area of development that is both qualitative and longitudinal. Qualitative research, which allows the voices of both individuals and family members to be heard, will add to the growing body of literature on emerging adulthood. Longitudinal studies are a way to view changes in the developmental path; development is a process that goes through changes. Following families through the years can yield exactly the kind of data we need to explore the complexities of development.

An area of focus that is missing in short-term or longitudinal studies, and in which I am particularly interested, is the developmental of a sense of responsibility in students who have learning differences. Not only is this the first criterion of adulthood cited by emerging adult participants in Jeffrey Arnett’s seminal study (2000), it is also a developmental task crucial to students’ success in post-secondary education and in the work environment.

Finally, both students and mothers participating in this study told me that the actual amount of time they spent communicating with each other—whether by phone, e-mail, text messages, or Skype—remained fairly constant over the college years, even as the relationships were evolving. This raises the question of whether we are spending too much time looking at the quantity of connection between students and parents and not enough time looking at its quality. There is a need for further research on the topic of identity development of emerging adults within the context of family that allows the complexity of each voice to be heard.

Researcher Reflections

I began this project with a hunch. I hoped that by asking both students and family members to share their stories I would get a clearer view of the complex nature of finding self within the context of family. As the project progressed and I immersed myself into the voices of the participants, I started to realize there was depth in hearing both student and mother at the same time to compare voices, words, themes, and feelings. I started to become aware that there is wisdom in looking at any story from more than one angle. I end this project grateful that I followed that hunch. It has begun a research path for me that fits the questions I am asking.

Just as I chose to study the students' development of voice within the context of family, I realize that I intentionally chose to do so in collaboration with each of the participants. I met with each student not once, but three times: the first time to have a short discussion about the project, the second time for an in-depth, hour-long interview; and the third time to give the student a copy of his or her I-poem and to discuss the project from the point of view illustrated by the students' own words. Developing a relationship with each student was an important part of the study for me.

Creating a safe space to speak, especially with students who have had challenges in the school environment, was crucial. In his book, *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Parker Palmer describes the importance of helping others to speak:

I now understand what Nelle Morton meant when she said that one of the great tasks in our time is to "hear people to speech." Behind their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices be heard. . . .What does it mean to listen to a voice before it is spoken? It means making space for the other, being aware of the other, paying attention to the other, honoring the other. (p. 46)

The ability to “hear people to speech” is an important tool for qualitative researchers. Our research is dependent on developing a connection with our participants that allows stories to be shared. In addition, the fact that giving participants a copy of their I-poems was so powerful helps shed light on the use of voice-centered analysis as an approach to research as well as analysis.

It is my hope that this study will add to the growing body of literature with an interdisciplinary approach to the study of identity development of emerging adults, college students with and without learning differences, and marginalized populations.

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APPENDIX A

Critical Event #1: Early Diagnosis

Students' Perspective

	Confusion/Shame	Mother initiated testing	Negative self-descriptions	Separation from classmates
C# 1 Sarah	*	*	*	*
C# 2 Bill	*	*	*	
C# 3 Katherine	*		*	*
C# 4 Ricky	*	*	*	
C# 5 Isabella	*		*	*
C# 6 Shlomo	*	*	*	*

Mothers' Perspective

	Mother involvement more than teachers	Spoke of personal pain	Advocate/Lawyer involvement fighting with school	Spoke of students strengths
C# 1 Rachel				*
C# 2 Helen	*	*	*	*
C# 3 Briana				*
C# 4 Maggie and Lisa	*	*	*	*
C# 5 Lisa		*	*	*
C# 6 Wendy	*		*	*

APPENDIX B

Critical Event #2: Decision to Go to College

Students' Perspective

	Motivation unclear	Impact of siblings	Shift in primary parent relied on	Outside Hobbies crucial
C# 1 Sarah			*	*
C# 2 Bill		*	*	*
C# 3 Katherine	*	*	*	*
C# 4 Ricky	*		*	*
C# 5 Isabella			*	*
C# 6 Shlomo	*	*		*

Mothers' Perspective

	Hired/ or relied on outside help	Mother attended college	Mentioned students motivation	Admitted she wanted it more than student
C# 1 Rachel	*		*	
C# 2 Helen		*	*	
C# 3 Briana		*	*	
C# 4 Maggie and Lisa	*			*
C# 5 Lisa	*		*	
C# 6 Wendy	*	*	*	

APPENDIX C

Critical Event #3: Transition to College

Students' Perspective

	Happened in stages	Shift from parent to mentor	Homesick	Involved more than one college
C# 1 Sarah	*	*	*	
C# 2 Bill	*	*		
C# 3 Katherine	*	*	*	
C# 4 Ricky	*			
C# 5 Isabella	*	*		*
C# 6 Shlomo	*			*

Mothers' Perspective

	Positive transition	Difficult first semester	Difficult first two years	Better than high school
C# 1 Rachel	*			*
C# 2 Helen		*		*
C# 3 Briana		*		
C# 4 Maggie and Lisa		*		*
C# 5 Lisa			*	
C# 6 Wendy			*	

APPENDIX D

Critical Event #4: Selection of Major

Students' Perspective

	Motivation external	Motivation internal	Fell into it	Still unsure Even with decision made
C# 1 Sarah	*			*
C# 2 Bill		*	*	
C# 3 Katherine		*		
C# 4 Ricky	*	*		
C# 5 Isabella			*	
C# 6 Shlomo	*			*

Mothers' Perspective

	Worried	Confident	Mother involved in choice	Family involved in choice
C# 1 Rachel	*			
C# 2 Helen	*		*	*
C# 3 Briana		*	*	*
C# 4 Maggie and Lisa				*
C# 5 Lisa		*		
C# 6 Wendy	*			

APPENDIX E

Consent Form

How Do College Students with Learning Disabilities
Develop Internal Voice within the Context of Family?

Contacts:

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If you have any concerns about this project at any time, you may contact:

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To all study participants:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this academic study. As we have discussed, this study focuses on the way that students with learning disabilities experience the demands of college. In particular, the study is designed to contribute to an understanding of two changing relationships during the period of emerging adulthood: the students' relationships with their families, and the families' relationship with the academic institution.

The goal of the study is to help colleges and universities do a better job helping students with learning disabilities, as well as their families, to manage the transition from high school and to cope with the demands of college. I am grateful for your participation, without which this study would not be possible.

This Consent Form describes certain aspects of the study, as well as your rights as a participant. Please read it carefully and, if you choose to continue, please sign below to indicate your consent and your understanding of what is being asked of you. A copy will be provided to you for your reference.

Participation is voluntary. You are not required to participate in this study. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and there will be no repercussions should you decide to do so.

You have the right to ask questions. Please feel free, at any time, to ask questions about the nature of this study, its purposes, its conclusions, or any other aspect.

Your role in the study:

- **FOR STUDENTS ONLY:** You are being asked to participate in two face-to-face interviews, each of which will last approximately 60 minutes. During each interview, I will be asking you questions about your school history, your family's involvement in your schooling, and your experiences during college so far.
- **FOR FAMILY MEMBERS ONLY:** You are being asked to participate in one 60-minute interview. I will be asking you about the student's school history, and your and other family members' involvement in the student's schooling.
- I will be tape-recording the interviews, which will later be transcribed for my use.
- The tape recordings and transcripts are for my use only. They will not be publicly disclosed. If you prefer that the interview, or particular parts of it, not be recorded or transcribed, simply let me know. During the interview, you can ask me to stop the taping at any time, and I will do so.
- After our interview(s), I may call or e-mail you to ask you to clarify or expand on a comment.
- I may ask you to share results from past psycho-educational testing or other documentation of your learning disability. Again, this information will be kept confidential, and if used in the study, will be reported without identifying you.
- I may also ask you to share with me, and talk about, photographs or creative artwork that you have completed in the past. You are not required to do so. Any materials provided will be used only to help me understand your experiences, and they will be returned to you.

Confidentiality and anonymity:

- Your involvement in this study is completely confidential and anonymous.
- Your name will not be used in data collection or in any written report. Instead, I will identify you only with a pseudonym of your choosing. The typed transcripts will bear only this pseudonym, and not your real name. I am the only one who will have access to the transcript of our conversations.
- In addition to use of the pseudonym, in any report I provide about this study, I will make best efforts to remove, or generalize, any other personal information (schools attended, teachers' names, etc.) that would tend to make you identifiable to third parties.
- Your interview responses will be kept strictly anonymous unless something you say in the interview causes me to believe that you are in danger of hurting yourself or someone else, in which case I will be obligated to contact appropriate resources.

Risks and benefits of your participation:

- There is no foreseeable risk of harm to you by participating in the study.
- During the study, you will be asked to share information about yourself. To the extent that you discuss matters that you consider personal or sensitive, it is possible that the interview process could provoke unexpected emotions for you. As stated above, however, you have the right at any time to take a break, end the interview, or end your participation in the project altogether. If you request, I can provide you with information about counseling resources that may be available to you.
- It may also happen that you will feel that our conversations are beneficial to you, because they give you the opportunity to share your feelings and perceptions.
- Another benefit may be your recognition that by participating in this study, you are helping to provide information that will be used to benefit other college students with learning disabilities, as well as their families and academic institutions.

Thank you for participating.
Sincerely,

Lynn Abrahams, researcher

Date

PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT:

I have read this Consent Form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions about it. My signature below acknowledges that I have been informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of my participation in this project, and that I am participating in it voluntarily, free from coercion of any kind.

Participant

Date

APPENDIX F

Contact Summary Form

Case:

Site:

Source of Data:

Contact Date:

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck me with this contact?
2. Summarize the information I got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions:
 1. History and Diagnosis of LD:
 2. Decision to come to college:
 3. Transition from HS to college:
 4. Decision of major:
 5. "Finding yourself":
 6. Changes in relationship with parents:
 7. Advice for students:
 8. Advice for parents:
3. Anything else that struck me as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important in this contact?
4. What new (or remaining) target questions do I have for this participant?

APPENDIX G

**Demographic Survey
Designated Family Member**

Pseudonym (or name):

Date of Birth:

Marital Status:

Number of Children:

Educational Background:

Work Background:

Religious Affiliation (if any)

Are there any other family members with a diagnosis of learning disabilities? Who? What is the diagnosis?

APPENDIX H

Interview Protocol: Designated Family Member(s)

The purpose of this interview is to solicit your thoughts, memories, or feelings about parenting college students with learning disabilities. This will be an open-ended interview in order to encourage the opportunity for you to think out-loud about a variety of topics.

Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about when your daughter/son was first diagnosed with learning differences?
2. Could you describe how your daughter/son came to the decision to come to college?
 - a. What was the college search like for her/him? For you?
 - b. What was the application process like?
3. What was the transition from high school to college like for her/him? For you?
 - a. The summer before college?
 - b. Move-in day?
 - c. First few weeks of school?
 - d. Could you describe a time in college when she/he had a problem or an obstacle in her/his way?
 - e. (If you went to college) What role did your family play when you first came to college?
4. Can you describe how your daughter/son came to decide on a major?
5. For some students, college is a time of “finding themselves.” Do you think this is the case for your daughter/son? If so can you describe how you see that? If not, can you tell me more about that?
6. Over the college years do you think your interactions with your daughter/son have changed? If so, can you describe the changes?
 - a. How would you describe your role in her/his academic life?
 - b. In her/his social life?

7. What advice would you give to parents of a first-year college student with a learning disability?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the experience of parenting a college student with learning disabilities?

APPENDIX I

**Demographic Survey
Student**

How do College Students with Learning Disabilities Develop Internal Voice within the Context of Family?

Student Pseudonym:

Date of Birth:

List family members:

Religious upbringing (if applicable):

High School: Private
Public

Year in College:

Major:

When were you first tested for a learning disability?

What diagnosis was given?

APPENDIX J

Interview Protocol: Student

How do College Students with Learning Disabilities Develop Internal Voice within the Context of Family?

Interviewer:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Date of Interview:

Time:

Place:

The purpose of this interview is to solicit your thoughts, memories, and feelings about your experiences in college. This will be an open-ended interview in order to encourage you to reflect aloud about a variety of topics.

Your name will not be used in research findings, written reports, or presentations connected to this project. Please feel free to ask questions about the study at any time.

Some general probes: Could you tell me more?
Could you give me more detail?

1. Could you describe how you came to the decision to come to college?
 - a. What was the college search like for you?
 - b. What was the application process like?
2. What was the shift from high school to college like for you?
 - a. Move-in day?
 - b. First few weeks of school?
3. Could you describe a time when you had a problem or an obstacle in your way?
 - a. How did you get through it?
 - b. Whom do you turn to for support?

4. What role did your family play when you first came to college? Has your family's role changed? If so, how?
 - a. Please describe a specific interaction with a family member since you've been at school.
5. Has having a learning disability had an impact on your college experience?
6. Some people describe college as a time of "finding themselves." Does this resonate with your experiences?
 - a. Please describe a specific time when you had a new insight or understanding about yourself during college.
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the experience of being a student with learning disabilities?